ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY

THE BEST WILD WEST STORIES PUBLISHED

Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1906, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C., by STREET & SMITH, *79-89 Seventh Avenue, N. Y. Application made at the N. Y. Post Office for entry as Second-class Matter.*

No. 117 NEW YORK, JULY 14, 1906. **Price, Five Cents**

KING OF THE WILD WEST'S MOTOR CAR

or Stella Fosdick's Peril

"Shoot at the tires!" shouted the young King of the Wild West. "It is our only hope for saving the girl."

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King of the Wild West's Motor Car;

OR,

STELLA FOSDICK'S PERIL.

By NED TAYLOR.

CHAPTER I.

A CASE FOR THE ROUGH RIDERS.

A clock in the City Hall Plaza sent twelve booming notes echoing through the night air. Ted Strong got out of a rocking-chair on the veranda of the Ford Hotel and looked over the railing into the deserted street.

"Midnight," he muttered, "and I suppose it's safe for me to call on the sheriff."

Passing into the hotel, he made his way to a flight of stairs at the back, descended and got out of the building by a rear door.

Washington Street, the main thoroughfare of the city of Phœnix, Arizona, was Ted's nearest course to the sheriff's office in the court-house, which was several blocks west of the City Hall. But Ted did not go that way.

Instead, he made a wide detour through back streets, came out on Washington Street in front of the Court-house Square, hurried across, and entered the building. The building was dark at every window, and the corridor in which the leader of the rough riders found himself was as black as Erebus.

He had not been in the sheriff's office before, and was just striking a match to locate himself when a door opened, and a voice called:

"This way!"

Ted advanced in the direction from which the voice came, and was soon caught by a hand, pushed out through the gloom.

"Ted Strong, King of the Wild West?" queried the voice that had already spoken.

"The same," replied Ted. "Are you Sheriff McFarland?"

"You've struck it, my lad. You see, I was waiting for you."

The door was carefully closed and locked; then Ted was guided into another room, the door of which was likewise closed and secured. Groping his way to an electric fixture, the sheriff turned on the light.

The officer and Ted were in the private office of the sheriff of Maricopa County. The two outer windows of the room were heavily curtained to prevent any light from reaching the street.

"I reckon you understand, Mr. Strong," said McFarland, "that I wouldn't take all these precautions if I didn't think it necessary."

"You probably know your business, Mr. McFarland," Ted answered, dropping into a chair. "It seems a little odd, though, that in a town the size of Phœnix you'd have to go to all this trouble, just for a talk with me."

"I have reason to believe that there are spies, watching me and watching you, too. Success in the work that is to claim our attention depends upon the care with which

we cover our movements. That was why I had that note smuggled into your hands by a trusted deputy, earlier in the day, asking you to come here at midnight, and to take a roundabout course."

Such extreme precautions spoke of dangerous business, and Ted's curiosity was mounting high.

"How did you know I was in town?" he asked.

"I have been looking for you for the last three days."

"Then how did you know I was coming?"

"Stella Fosdick told me she had sent for you. She claims to be a girl pard of yours," the sheriff added, with a smile.

"She's the clear quill," Ted averred warmly, "and rendered me a service once that I shall never forget. I told her then that if she ever needed the rough riders, all she had to do was to drop me a line. That's the reason I'm here."

"How many of the rough riders came with you?"

"Three; two of them secured horses and went on to the Big Pima Mine, while I remained at the hotel—all in accordance with instructions contained in Stella's letter."

"What became of the other one?"

"That's Bud Morgan. He went sightseeing at Ash Fork and the train pulled out without him. He wired us at Prescott, however, that he'd be along in the morning."

"I suppose you haven't any idea what Stella wants you for?"

"Not the slightest. Her mere request that she wanted us was sufficient."

"That's mighty generous of you, Ted Strong."

"I don't look at it in that way, Mr. McFarland. It's a small thing to do when one considers the obligations I am under to Stella Fosdick."

"I doubt whether she would have put you to all this trouble if I hadn't advised it."

Ted was a little disappointed, at that. He had hoped that Stella felt perfectly free to call on him.

"The fact is," went on the sheriff gravely, "the girl is in great danger."

"What sort of danger?"

"Of all the people in Arizona, she is the only one who can furnish evidence against the notorious Nick Norris that will send that versatile highwayman to the gallows."

"Nick Norris! Is he the rascal they have nicknamed Nick o' the Night?"

"He's the one. An accomplished villain, Ted Strong, who has brazenly defied the authorities of Arizona and New Mexico for more than a year. And yet, so cunningly does he conceal his hand, and so faithful are the men he has gathered around him, that not one of his many crimes can be proved to be of his doing—excepting, of course, the one which Stella saw with her own eyes."

"What did Stella see that means so much for Nick Norris?"

"The killing of her brother, Roy Fosdick. It was a wanton deed, and I will not go into it further than to say that it is the only crime which we know *absolutely* that Nick Norris has committed. At the same time his gang, known by the respectable name of Tonto Basin Mining Company, is engaged in lawless work every day in the year."

"How many are there in this so-called mining company?"

"No one knows. We have evidence, however, that there are quite a number. The authorities cannot make a movement that does not reach the ears of Nick Norris. That is why I am so careful not to make a misplay, now that you have arrived here."

"Let me get this thing right, Mr. McFarland," said Ted. "Stella is a menace to Nick Norris, and he would take desperate measures to get her out of the way. Is that what constitutes the girl's danger?"

"It is. With her out of the way, Nick o' the Night would be free to come and go, so far as the authorities are concerned. If he was arrested, it would be on suspicion, and nothing could be proved against him.

"And there is another point not to be overlooked: In fastening the crime of murder upon Norris, Stella would have to face him at the bar, and identify him. But for this, the girl's mere deposition would answer every purpose."

"Has Stella any fears——"

"Fear!" exclaimed the sheriff. "Stella doesn't know what fear is."

"I know that very well; but if she is anxious to see justice done on her brother's account, she ought to be very careful not to put herself in the way of Norris and his gang."

"I have tried to impress that fact upon her, but she declares that she will go and come as she pleases, and that if Norris attempts to interfere with her the law will be saved a disagreeable duty."

"I suppose she is at the Big Pima Mine?"

"No doubt. All she wanted you to lay over in Phœnix for was to give me a chance to talk with you."

"The case for the rough riders, then," said Ted briskly, "consists in winding up this Tonto Basin Mining Company?"

"The capture of Nick Norris will wind up the company, all right. He is the one man who holds the lawless crew together."

"Has anything been done, or is anything being done at the present moment, looking to the capture of Norris?"

"We have tried hard enough, but nothing has been accomplished. That is one reason why I insisted that Stella have you come on and take a hand in the game. If any one can lay Nick o' the Night by the heels, I am sure it is the King of the Wild West."

Ted Strong made no reply. It was a peculiar situation, and he was thinking over it.

"Two of my best deputies are in the hills now," the sheriff went on, "but I am sure they will be no more successful in locating Norris than others have been. Norris is full of shrewd tricks, and——"

At this moment a rap fell on the door of the outer room. McFarland started up with a muttered exclamation.

"Some one has found out that I am in my office," he whispered, with a worried look.

"Answer the summons, Mr. McFarland," said Ted.

"But it won't do for you to be seen here, talking with me."

"Keep the caller in the other room."

"I may have to bring him in here."

"Very well," said Ted, "then bring him here. I'll be out of sight."

A large map of Arizona hung across one corner of the room. As Ted spoke, he pulled one edge of the map outward and stepped into the angle of the wall.

With his knife he bored a small peep-hole in the muslin and paper; and thus, completely screened, he was able both to see and to hear whatever took place.

The rapping on the outer door had been repeated. As soon as Ted was hidden, the sheriff passed out of the private office and the young rough rider heard the door open. Then followed an astonished exclamation from the sheriff.

"Great Scott, Burton! What are you doing here?" McFarland said.

"I've brought in one of the Tonto Basin Mining Company, Mac," replied the deputy. "He wants ter tell ye somethin' about Nick o' the Night."

The next moment the sheriff returned, bringing two men.

CHAPTER II.

TRAITOR, OR TRICKSTER?

One of the two who came into the room with McFarland was a brawny, blue-shirted man with two six-shooters flopping at his hips; the other was a low-browed, sullen-looking individual with his arm in a sling.

"What's this man's name, Burton?" queried the sheriff, staring hard at the man with the injured hand.

"Jim Blazer is the label I tote," the fellow spoke up.

"Where did you pick him up?" The sheriff put the question to his deputy.

"Out by the Arizony Canal," answered Burton. "He come out o' the hills, racin' like sin along the Black Cañon trail, hollerin' to Mizner an' me fer help."

"Some one chasing him?"

"Not as we could see."

"'Course ye couldn't see," put in Jim Blazer. "As soon's the rest o' the minin' comp'ny ketched on to who I was runnin' arter, they faced about t'other way."

"Why were you running away from your companions?" asked McFarland, leveling a steady glance at the man.

"Kase I'm done with 'em, that's why. I allers been honest an' I don't propose ter go agin' the law now."

"You know Nick Norris?"

"Better'n I wisht I did! He's suspicious o' me an' put a bullet through my arm. It was a bad shot. What he wanted ter do was ter wipe me out. I didn't propose ter stay with the gang any longer, an' give 'em another chance at me."

"Do you know where Norris can be found?"

"No. He don't never stay in one place more'n a few hours at a stretch."

"I thought you said he wanted to tell me something about Nick o' the Night?" observed McFarland, looking at Burton.

Again Blazer spoke before the deputy had a chance.

"It's about somethin' the gang's goin' ter do ter-morrer that I want ter tell ye. They're up ter crooked work at all times, but they was suspicious o' me, an' this here job was the only thing I been able ter find out."

"What kind of a job is it?"

"What kind of a deal kin I make with ye fer the information?" was the shrewd response.

The sheriff was silent for a moment.

"Not knowing how much the information may be worth," he answered finally, "I can't tell you beforehand."

"What I want," continued Blazer "is one hundred dollars. That'll git me ter Denver, whar I can't be reached by the gang. They'll find out what I done, an' if I lingered around here they'd sure git me."

"You have admitted," said McFarland sternly, "that you were a member of a criminal gang. I can lock you up on your own showing."

"Sure ye kin, but ye can't make out no case agin' me. An' lockin' me up ain't goin' ter make me talk."

"Give me your information, Blazer," proceeded McFarland. "If I find it to be worth anything, I'll give you one hundred dollars. While we're finding out whether your news is valuable, or not, we will guard you from the gang by locking you up in the jail."

"That's good enough fer me," answered Blazer, with a promptness that surprised the sheriff.

"Very well, then. Fire away."

"Ye know the Dutchman that runs that hossless wagon an' kerries the mail between Phœnix an' the Big Pima?"

"Yes."

"Well, the gang's goin' ter lay fer him ter-morrer an' hold him up."

"Why will they do that? There won't be any valuable pickings."

"What they want is the mail-bag."

"Why the mail-bag?"

"Kase it's got a letter inside that Nick o' the Night is dead hungry ter git holt of."

"Can you tell me anything about the letter?"

"It's from a man in Ash Fork, a friend of Nick Norris', an' tells what these here rough riders are goin' to do. Nick is afeared o' Ted Strong, an' thinks the King o' the Wild West is about the hardest proposition he's been up ag'inst yet."

"What makes Norris think that Ted Strong is coming to Arizona?"

"He got next ter that jest like he gits next ter everythin' else. He's got friends everywhere, an' they keep their eyes skinned an' let him know what ter expect."

"The letter isn't addressed to Norris, at the Big Pima?"

"Not much! It's addressed ter Hank Chislett, one o' the gang that got work at the Big Pima jest ter keep an eye on things at the mine."

"Well, if Chislett is going to get the letter, and then turn it over to Norris, what does Norris want his men to hold up the Dutch mail-carrier for?"

"Chislett ain't at the mine no more. He got ter snoopin' round an' the super fired him. Nick don't know how ter git the letter unless he holds up the mail-carrier."

"Where's the hold-up going to take place?"

"Ye kin search me."

"Who is this friend of Norris' in Ash Fork?"

"Pass the ante. I've told ye all I knowed. The letter comes down on the mornin' train, an' goes out by the Dutchman in the hossless wagon. That's every last thing I kin tell ye, but I reckon it's mighty important—ter the rough riders, anyways."

"Why does Norris want to keep track of the rough riders?"

To Ted, watching and listening behind the big map, this seemed like a useless question.

"Well, it's a case o' up-sticks with Nick unless he kin

clean out Ted Strong an' his bunch. I opine he wants ter l'arn whar they're goin' an' then lay fer 'em."

McFarland asked Blazer other questions, some of which he would not answer, and others which he said he could not. Those which he refused pointblank to reply to, mainly concerned his past history. In the end, he was turned over to Burton, and removed to the jail. As soon as the deputy and Blazer had left, Ted came out from behind the map and resumed his chair.

"Well," said McFarland, "what do you think of this development? Is Blazer a traitor, or a trickster?"

"You have an idea that Nick o' the Night sent him to you with that story?"

"The excuse he gives for turning informer sounds rather fishy."

"What object would Norris have to gain by sending Blazer here with such a story?"

"Well, he's a cunning rogue and goes at things in a roundabout way sometimes."

"Blazer seems to be a tough customer, but, according to my notion, he's telling a straight story and acting in good faith."

"How could this friend of Nick Norris' get news of your movements in Ash Fork?"

Ted looked grave, but did not reply.

"You said," continued McFarland, "that you had left one of your men there."

"Yes—Bud Morgan."

"Would he turn against you, and——"

"Never! Bud is as true as steel."

"It seems strange that any one in Ash Fork could find out what you intended to do. It may be that some of your friends have talked rather too freely?"

Ted was puzzled, but refused to admit that any of his rough rider comrades had been indiscreet. Bud had missed the train and been left behind, while Ben Tremont and Kit Summers had gone on to Big Pima Mine. Ted would have staked his life on the trustworthiness of any one of the three.

"Well," resumed the sheriff, "however it figures out, a chance has come to capture some of the gang in an act of lawlessness. I can have a posse follow the German mail-carrier to-morrow forenoon; then, if an attack is made, they can swoop down on the rascals and capture them."

"I have another plan," said Ted.

"What is it?"

"I should like to keep it to myself; but I will say that I would like the robbery to occur as planned, and I don't want any of your men to follow the mail-carrier."

"But the United States mail! We can't allow that to be tampered with."

"It won't be tampered with, Mr. McFarland."

"But you just said——"

"Exactly," interrupted Ted, smiling at the sheriff's bewilderment. "I am a deputy United States marshal, and to prevent a robbery of the mails falls to me rather more than it does to you. Will you leave the whole affair to me?"

"Certainly, if you wish it. But you've got me over my head, Ted Strong."

"Everything will be explained to you in good time. Will you give me a letter of introduction to the postmaster here?"

"Sure."

"What time does the mail-carrier pull out in the morning?"

"As soon as the morning train from Ash Fork and Prescott arrives, and the Big Pima pouch is got ready—probably about nine o'clock."

"Blazer said something about a 'horseless wagon.'"

"The mail-carrier uses a motor-car."

"Rather a novel thing for a frontier star route, isn't it?"

"Well, yes. You see, the car was raffled off a few weeks ago, and the Dutchman got it."

"What is the Dutchman's name?"

"Fritz Webber."

The sheriff had turned to his desk and was writing the letter to the postmaster.

"There is one other thing I wish you to do for me," went on Ted, when he had received the letter. "When Bud Morgan gets in, in the morning, please tell him to go to the post-office and ride out to the Big Pima Mine with Fritz Webber."

"I don't think Fritz will carry any passengers."

"He'll carry Bud," said Ted confidently.

"You're a strange fellow, Ted Strong," said McFarland. "There are few men I can't read, but you're a closed book to me."

"It's a mighty good thing to be a closed book—sometimes."

A few minutes later, the King of the Wild West left the sheriff's office, leaving the place as secretly as he had approached it.

The City Hall clock was on the stroke of two when Ted crawled into his bed, at the Ford.

"Now for a few hours' sleep," he muttered, "and then for a play to win!"

CHAPTER III.

THE MAIL ROBBERY.

"Hello, thar, Dutchy!"

"Hello yerself vunce!"

"Yer name Fritz Webber?"

"Vell, I haf been called dot, seferal dimes."

"Ye kerry ther mail between hyer an' the Big Pima Mine, don't ye?"

"I don'd carry him, py shinks! Der oddermopeel carries me und der mail."

"Jumpin' sand-hills! 'Oddermopeel!' Is thet ther best ye kin do?"

"Vat's der madder mit dot?"

"Well, ye're gittin' ther adverb before ther semicolon. Ther right way ter say ther word is like this hyer——'ortermobeel.'"

"Dot's vat I say—'oddermopeel.'"

"Oh, perlice! Yer talk like a sausage-factory."

"You dink you vas some shmart Alecks, hey? Looky here vunce. You make some monkey-doodle pitzness mit me, und py dunder, I cut dot yaller hair your headt off! Ven I ged my mad oop I'm vorse as a cyclone."

"Ye're all right, Fritz. I was only funnin'. Morgan's my handle, Bud Morgan. I was told ter come over hyer ter the post-office an' ride with ye ter the Big Pima."

"Ye're one oof der tough riders, hey?"

"Tough riders! Now wouldn't thet rattle yer spurs? Rough riders, y'u maverick."

"Vell, id's all der same ding. I don'd carry passengers in der Red Flier mit deir guns on."

"What's ther matter with my hardware?"

"Der kover'men von't shtand for passengers mit deir guns on, dot's all."

"What am I ter do with my forty-fours if I want ter ride with ye?"

"I vill take charge oof der veppins."

"I hates ter give 'em up, but if that's ther rule, why, hyer they be."

"Dot's right, Pud. Hop indo der oddermopeel und ve vill skiddoo."

Bud Morgan, but recently arrived from Ash Fork, had been met by the sheriff, according to the request of Ted Strong, and told to take passage with Fritz Webber, the mail-carrier. Fritz had just flung his mail-sack into the motor-car at the rear of the post-office, when Bud appeared. The conversation already chronicled had taken place, and Bud, after yielding up his belt and shooters, had climbed into the seat beside Fritz.

Fritz had a red face, overlong carroty hair, and a plaid fore-and-aft cap. Although it was quite a warm morning, Fritz had his coat-collar turned up under his ears, so that all that could be seen of his head was the carroty hair and a small patch of face.

From the post-office, Fritz steered the Red Flier into Washington Street, and out along this thoroughfare into the locality known as the Five Points; here he turned into Grand Avenue, which was little more than a tree-lined country road. A mile along the avenue, a sharp turn was made to the north.

"Dis is der Plack Cañon Road," Fritz explained to his companion; "ye foller him straight across der town ditch, den across der Arizona Canal, den over der desert und indo der hills."

"How far away is this hyer Big Pima Mine?"

"Twendy miles avay."

"How long does it take ye ter make the trip with this gasoline-cart?"

"Two hours und a haluf, oof ve haf no drouples py der roadt."

"Troubles? What sort o' troubles do yer hev?"

"Vell, somedimes I haf drouples mit der wagon, yes. She don'd vant to go, un den I coax her along mit der monkey-wrench."

They rode on for awhile in silence. Beside the road were ditches of water, supplied from the town canal; back of the ditches were big cottonwood-trees; and back of the trees broad fields of alfalfa. The air was invigorating, the scenery peaceful, and Bud was beginning to get over the hard feelings he had cherished against fate for hanging him up in Ash Fork.

"You know Ted Strong pooty vell, eh?" inquired Fritz.

"Fair ter middlin'," grinned Bud.

"He iss vone oof dose vind-chammers, yes?"

"What's thet?" bristled Bud. "Wind-jammer, huh? Say, Dutch, I got er whalin' big notion ter tie you up in a couple o' kinks. Don't tune up yore bazoo in that sorter way if ye want ter keep on good terms with me. Ted Strong is ace-high, an' the best ever. Ask somebody thet knows."

"He dinks der tough riders iss some punkins, but I bet your life I could fool 'em." Fritz Webber chuckled as he spoke.

"Oh, you say moo an' chase yerself!" grunted the disgusted Bud.

"Vat vas der madder mit you in Ash Fork? Tell me dot! V'y you don'd know enough to get on a train ven id pulls oudt alretty."

"Say, Weenywurst, you got gas enough fer a balloon ascension. But I reckon thet's all thar is to ye. Yore cue is ter keep mum, if ye don't want more trouble than ye kin fix with thet thar monkey-wrench ye was speakin' of."

After that there seemed a coolness between the mail-carrier and his passenger. They reached the Arizona Canal, ten miles out of Phœnix, crossed it, and struck into the flat stretch of desert that lay between the water-course and the hills.

There was some sand in the trail, but not enough to impede the progress of the motor-car to any great extent. Half an hour later, they came to a pass through the bare uplifts—a rocky and dismal place.

In the middle of the pass they met a man on horseback; a man with a Winchester across the saddle in front of him, and with a red handkerchief tied across his face, just under the eyes.

This man raised the gun, as the motor-car drew close, and drew a bead on Fritz.

"Halt!" came the sharp command. "Stand right whar ye air, or I'll open up with cold lead."

"*Ach, du lieber!*" cried the startled Fritz. Another moment and he had manipulated the lever and brought the car to a frantic halt.

"Go on, y'u cowardly Dutchman!" roared Bud, leaping to his feet. "Dig in with yer spurs—give 'er every ounce o' steam!"

"I radder be a life Dutchman as a dead vone any day," quaked Fritz; then added to the man on the horse: "Don'd shoot, goot Misder Mans. Come oop und dake eferyding vat I got, only don'd pull der drigger!"

Contempt and anger burst from Bud. He reached for his guns, only to remember that he had given them up some time before.

"Whar's my hardware?" he yelped in the ear of Fritz.

"Never mind yer hardware," came sternly from the man on horseback. "Down in yer seat, or I'll make a lead-mine out o' ye!"

There was nothing else for Bud to do—especially as two more mounted men, each similarly armed and disguised, had ridden out from each side of the pass.

"Ye've got ther drop," grunted Bud sulkily, "but if I had my guns, we'd hev a pull at this thing till ther latigoes snapped, anyways. Come up an' pocket yer plunder; but arter thet, look out fer me. I'll nail the bunch o' ye sooner er later."

The three men closed in silently but resolutely. When each had pulled to a halt within a couple of feet of the car, the spokesman for the trio ordered the mail-pouch thrown into the trail.

Fritz picked it up and tossed it overboard. One of the robbers dismounted and picked it up.

"Now, then," said the leader of the bandits, "ride on; an' if either o' ye look back once, he'll git a bullet between the eyes."

The robber backed his horse away and left the trail clear. Fritz started the car and developed a tremendous spurt of speed.

"Git us ter the Big Pima, er any other place whar I kin corral a hoss!" fumed Bud. "The way thet thar thing was pulled of 'u'd make the ha'r stand on a buffaler-robe. Jumpin' sand-hills! When Ted hears o' this, er Ben,

er Kit, they'll think I'm on the back-number list, fer sure."

Fritz made the machine fairly jump over the trail. Even though he had been threatened with a bullet between the eyes, Bud stared back along the course they had covered.

There was nothing to be seen of the three bandits. They had vanished among the rocks as mysteriously as they had appeared.

"Blamed queer!" murmured Bud, having a little time to think things over. "I never seen sich a peculiar lot o' highwaymen. All they wanted was thet thar mail-sack. They didn't seem ter think we might be totin' any vallybles."

"I'd haf fought mit dem fellers like anyding oof I had felt in der mood," remarked Fritz.

"Git out!" exclaimed Bud disgustedly. "Ye ain't got sand enough ter call yer soul yer own."

"Vell, I know vat I know, dot's all. I been pooty foxy vunce in avile."

"Foxy?" Bud had a sudden idea, and sat up glaring. "I'm beginnin' ter think ye *was* foxy. How do I know ye ain't standin' in with them thar bandits?"

"You don'd know dot."

"Mebby not, but I'm beginnin' ter hev a suspicion. What did ye take my guns fer? Like as not it was ter keep me from puttin' up a fight."

"Sure."

"Y'u was helpin' them robbers out!"

"I didn't want no fightin'."

"Looks ter me like ye wanted them ter git the mail-sack."

"I guess dot's der size oof id. You see, dot vas a dummy sack, und didn't have nodding in him but fake ledders, yes. Here iss der real sack mit der Big Pima mail."

Fritz bent down and pulled out another pouch from under the seat, where it had been carefully hidden.

Bud was dumfounded.

"Then ye fooled 'em a-purpose?" he asked.

"Yes," was the laughing reply, "and I fooled you, too, Bud."

The fore-and-aft cap came off, and with it the carroty wig.

"Moses ter Moses an' all hands round!" gasped Bud, dropping back in his seat, completely dazed. "Ted Strong, or I'm a shorthorn. Well, well, well!"

CHAPTER IV.

HOW BUD WAS "WORKED."

Ted had a hearty laugh at Bud's discomfiture.

"What in Sam Hill aire ye doin' this fer, Ted?" queried Bud, as soon as he had collected himself and was able to do a little rational thinking. "'Tain't often thet ye put up a possum play like thet."

"I had my reasons," said Ted, "and they were good ones."

"Ye made a crackin' good Dutchman, anyways," and Bud grinned as his thoughts reverted to all that had passed during the ride from Phœnix. "But it wasn't like ye ter let thet mail-bag go without a fight. An' ye wouldn't let *me* fight, nuther."

"I just told you that the stolen pouch was a dummy, and filled with bogus mail."

"Thet's so! Ye must hev knowed thar was goin' ter be a robbery."

"I did."

"An' ye fixed thet dummy sack up fer the robbers, hey?"

"Yes."

"But why? Thet gits me. Rather'n fix up a fake mail-sack fer 'em, why didn't ye lay out ter capter the bunch? Gad-hook it all, Ted, you an' me could hev put the kibosh on them three handy-boys as easy as fallin' off'n a log."

"That's precisely what I didn't want to do. I wanted the men to get away with the sack. I put in two solid hours this morning fixing that bag of mail up so the robbers couldn't suspect the material had been faked. And the Phœnix postmaster helped me."

"Make it plain ter me, Ted. Kain't ye see how narvous ye're makin' me by hangin' fire like ye are?"

"Ben and Kit are at the Big Pima Mine. When I explain to you, I want to explain to them at the same time. All you need to know now, is that all the robbers wanted was one particular letter, which came in on the same train with you from Ash Fork. A letter, addressed to the man the robbers were expecting to hear from, was put into the stolen sack. But it was a counterfeit letter, written by me. The real letter I have in my pocket. Authority to open it was sent to me from headquarters."

"It's a slick game ye're playin'," said Bud, "an' ye've got me guessin' fer fair. Are ye goin' ter peel off them duds, er wear 'em in ter Big Pima camp?"

"I'm going to wear them until after we arrive at the company store. As soon as we reach our destination, I want you to round up Ben and Kit and get them out of the camp to some place where we can have a quiet talk. Stella ought to be at the Big Pima, too, and I'd like to have her come with the boys."

"Keno! I'll take keer o' thet end of it."

"What did you do in Ash Fork, Bud?"

"I got left thar, principally," growled the long-haired cowboy.

"How did it happen?"

"Blamed accident. We had ter wait half an hour, as ye know, fer the southbound train on the Santa Fé, Prescott, and Phœnix, so I allowed ter mosey around an' look at ther town. It ain't much of er place, but I was bound I'd see all thet it had ter show.

"I was purty well out in the outskirts, when I thort I heerd a woman yell fer help. The distress-signal come from a 'dobe house, an' I pranced inter thet house, tore through a hall, an' stumbled inter a room as black as a dungeon.

"Then the door slammed, an' I heerd a bolt shoved. I yelled bloody murder, fer a spell, but it didn't do no good; then, purty soon, I hears the toot o' the whistle an' knowed my train had pulled out an' left me.

"It wa'n't no use keepin' riled arter thet, so I tried ter take it philosophic. In an hour er two the door was opened an' I rushed through like a tornader, only ter run up ag'inst the nicest leetle Mexican feller ye ever see. He was as perlite as a tin-horn gambler on pay-day, an' the mad all went out o' me.

"The little feller was Don Pedro Somethin'-er-other, an' he begged my pardon in forty-'leven diff'rent ways. He said it was all a mistake, an' that his servant, Chombo, had thort he'd captered a burglar. The yell I'd heerd was from a crazy woman that was taken off ter a Pres-

cott asylum, an' he was, oh, so bloomin' sorry if I had missed my train!

"'Course I couldn't feel ragged when he threw it inter me like that, an' when he said I was ter stay at his house till the follerin' mornin', thar wasn't nothin' fer me ter do but stay.

"The don interduced me to his gal, as likely a lookin' bundle o' muslin as ye ever set eyes on. She'd heerd o' Ted Strong an' the rough riders, an' my, how she did throw the bokays at you an' us!"

"Did you tell her anything about our being in this part of the country?" asked Ted, beginning to get a line on Nick o' the Night's mysterious correspondent at Ash Fork.

"Thar wasn't much I could tell her. She seemed ter know everythin'; an' would ye b'leeve it? Stella Fosdick is her bosom friend! Wouldn't thet knock ye slabsided? We had quite a talk about Stella, an' about our comin' hyer ter help her, an'——"

"In other words, my dear, loquacious friend," interrupted Ted dryly, "she pumped you to a fare-you-well."

"Nothin' o' the kind! No pumpin' about it. She an' the don went with me over ter the telegraph office when I sent thet message ter you, sayin' I'd got left an' would be along in the mornin'. When I turned away from the winder, the don happened to think of a message *he* wanted ter send; so the gal an' me visited an' swapped goo-goo eyes while the don was doin' the bizness. Arter thet, we all went back ter the house. Talk erbout royal treatment! I got it sure."

"Oh, mercy!" groaned Ted.

"Ye're jest mad 'cause you didn't git left, too," chuckled Bud.

"Look here, Bud," went on Ted, "the letter those robbers were after was written by the don, as you called him; and it put a lawless gang, out here in the hills, next to what we are intending to do. The girl pumped you dry. The don's message was to a man in Phœnix, warning the leader of the gang to be on the lookout for the letter."

"Stop yer joshin'," said Bud, a little startled. "Ye got it plum wrong, Ted. Thet leetle gal wa'n't thet kind, an' I'll take my afferdavit on it."

"She was, though," answered Ted.

It was clear to Ted that Bud had tumbled into a trap. The young King of the Wild West could not blame the big, good-natured fellow very much, however, because the trap had been skilfully set. Bud had been made to miss his train, then he had accepted the don's hospitality, and the don's daughter had done the rest.

Information of the intended mail robbery, which had been carried to the sheriff by Jim Blazer, had made it possible for Ted to execute a counter-stroke. If the counter-stroke succeeded, it might prove to be a good thing that the don and the girl had taken a hand in the game, and that Bud had been victimized.

"The gal's name," remarked Bud, "was Paquita."

"Did she give you her picture and a lock of her hair?" laughed Ted.

"Nary, pard. But I ain't goin' ter b'leeve thar was anythin' crooked about Paquita until I see it proved. Ther old don may be somethin' on the tin-horn order, but I'm bettin' a ten-dollar note agin' a last year's bird's-nest thet the gal is squar'."

Just then they reached a fork in the trail. Here a signboard informed them that the branch trail led to the Big Pima Mine, one mile away.

"Ye're purty well acquainted with this kentry, Ted, it seems ter me," said Bud, as Ted turned the Red Flier into the branch trail.

"It isn't any trick to find the Big Pima," Ted answered. "All we had to do was to strike a bee-line along the Black Cañon road from Phœnix."

"Hev any trouble gittin' the reg'lar mail-carrier ter let ye take his place?"

"The Phœnix postmaster told Fritz Webber what to do, and he did it."

Presently the car topped a "rise" and gave Ted and Bud a view of the mining-camp.

"I want to give you a pointer, Bud," Ted went on. "I want everybody in camp but the superintendent to think that I am Fritz Webber; and I want them to think, moreover, that the hold-up occurred just as the robbers planned it, and that the regular mail-bag was stolen."

"But the people hyer'll know, when they git their mail, thet——"

"They're not going to get their mail for a day or two."

"Goin' ter hold it out on 'em?"

"Yes."

"What's yer reason fer sich a play as thet?"

"The robbers may have spies in the camp; if they have, and if we don't make the spies think the robbery was a success, it will be all up with the scheme I am trying to work."

"I kin put up a purty good bluff tellin' about ther hold-up; only," and here Bud looked a little dubious, "Ben an' Kit'll think I'm a mighty swift rough rider ter do the ham-restin' act while the grafters was gittin' in their work."

"You must give Ben and Kit a tip on the side, Bud. They'll be after hikin' out on the trail of the robbers, and that won't do. Inside of an hour after we get into the camp, round up the boys and have them and Stella walk out to the main trail. I'll meet you all there and tell you my plans."

On the opposite side of the camp from that in which Ted and Bud entered it, a large adobe building could be seen with a group of men in front. This, evidently, was the mining company's store.

On second thoughts, Ted decided that he would not go there. Fritz Webber must be well known in the camp, and if Ted mingled with the men it would probably be discovered that he was not the regular mail-carrier.

The super's office was near at hand, and Ted brought the car to a stop in front of it.

"You go on to the store, Bud," said the King of the Wild West, "and report the robbery. I'll stop here and interview the super. Be careful, now, that you don't let the cat out of the bag. You'll understand how important this matter is when I meet you out on the main trail."

The crowd in front of the store, which seemed to have been waiting for the mail, evinced considerable surprise when the motor-car halted at the office. While Bud was hurrying on to tell the news, Ted entered the superintendent's office.

CHAPTER V.

TED'S CLEVER PLAN.

The wisdom of Ted's course in halting at the super's office instead of proceeding on to the store, was proved the moment the lad had entered the door of the small building. The super saw at a glance that he was not Fritz Webber.

Ted told of the robbery, and stated plainly that he and his rough riders had come to Arizona to help Stella by capturing Nick o' the Night; then he went on to describe a part of his plans, showing the super why he had fooled the robbers, and why he wanted the hold-up to appear to have been the real thing.

The super was astounded at the youth's daring, and readily agreed to take charge of the mail-bag and hold it securely until Ted had had an opportunity to carry out his plan.

While the young leader of the rough riders was talking with the man in charge of the Big Pima, half a dozen mounted men dashed past. They were well armed and were off in an attempt to apprehend the bandits. Ted noted with satisfaction that Bud had restrained the ardor of Ben and Kit, for they were not with the outfit.

The mail-sack was smuggled into the office and turned over to the super; thereupon Ted doffed the disguise he had worn and reappeared in his rough-rider costume. Watching his opportunity, he slipped away to the main trail where, in a cranny among the hills, he rejoined Bud and met Stella, Ben, and Kit.

Stella ran to him and caught both his hands.

"Ted!" she cried. "I knew you'd come, and—and——"

"Of course you knew I'd come," said Ted, his face aglow with pleasure. "Didn't I tell you I'd be on hand if you ever needed me, that last time I saw you up in Idaho?"

"But you're doing a lot," she murmured, "for a girl who—who——"

"Who saved my life," he finished. "Why shouldn't I?"

"By ther same token," struck in Bud, "why shouldn't the hull bunch of us do a lot fer ye, Stella? Ye're a pard o' ours, don't fergit thet."

"Ted hasn't got a monopoly of you, Stella," said Big Ben.

"Nor Bud, either," added Kit.

Stella was a dashing and beautiful girl; an unusual and picturesque product of the West. She was a woman to her heart's core, but a woman with all the courage and ability of the other sex.

She wore a white sombrero, a green flannel shirt with wide collar and flowing tie, short red skirts, laced boots, with tinkling silver spurs at the heels, and about her small waist was a belt with attached revolvers.

Nor was this costume made up for an appeal to the galleries. She was Queen of the Wild West, even as Ted Strong was king in the same domain.

"I don't think," said Stella, "that I should have sent for you at all if Mr. McFarland, the sheriff in Phœnix, hadn't advised it."

"I had hoped," said Ted soberly, "that you would feel free to call on the rough riders at any time."

"It wasn't that," answered the girl, a flush mantling her beautiful face, "but I hate to have it look as though I'd tackled a proposition that was too much for me. I'm a bit proud of my ability to take care of myself, you know, and to accomplish things."

"Even at thet, Stella," spoke up Bud, "ye ortn't ter be back'ard about callin' on yer pards. I wouldn't; an' neither would Ted, er Ben, er Kit."

"Well," said Ted, "let's all make ourselves comfortable and go over this thing together. I have a plan I want to lay before you."

As they all took seats on surrounding boulders, Stella inquired:

"McFarland told you about Nick Norris, didn't he, Ted?"

"He did," was Ted's reply.

"I have already told Ben and Kit about that," proceeded Stella.

"An' Ben and Kit put me next while we was comin' hyer," said Bud.

"That much is understood," added the girl, "so you can get right down to your plan. I'll bet my spurs it's a good one. You're equal to pretty near any kind of an emergency that comes up, Ted Strong."

"Haven't you got any bouquets for me?" asked Ben.

"Never ye mind thet webfoot, Stella," urged Bud. "If a purty gal crinkles up her eyes at him onct, he's on the mat fer fair. He ain't entitled ter any bokays—yet."

"Since you all know that Stella is in peril from Nick o' the Night and his Tonto Basin crowd," spoke up Ted, "it won't be necessary to go over that part of the business. The work laid out for us is the capture of Nick Norris, a wily and resourceful scoundrel who will give us all plenty to do. But luck came my way in Phœnix, and I have tried to make the most of the opportunity.

"While I was talking with the sheriff, a deputy brought in a man who had belonged to Nick Norris' band. The fellow had suffered rough treatment, and had turned informer. He told the sheriff that the mail-carrier was to be held up this morning, and the Big Pima mail-sack stolen. The robbers were to be part of the Tonto Basin outfit, and there was just one letter in the mail-bag that Nick o' the Night wanted. Here is the letter—I had it taken out in Phœnix while the mail was being transferred."

Ted drew a letter from his pocket. "It's addressed to Henry Chislett," said he, "at the Big Pima Mine, and is dated at Ash Fork yesterday."

"That's the place where Bud got hung up," interjected Kit.

Bud said nothing, but began to appear uncomfortable.

"'Ted Strong and three of his rough riders,'" proceeded Ted, reading from the letter, "'are on their way to meet Stella Fosdick somewhere north of Phœnix. As near as I can find out, Strong himself is to send his followers on to the Big Pima Mine and then follow later as soon as he has a talk with the sheriff in Phœnix. From the Big Pima Mine they go to the Tonto Basin country by way of Bridger's Gap. It would be easy for you to lay among the rocks in the Gap and wipe out the entire party without showing yourselves. At this writing, and from all I can hear, Ted Strong does not yet know what Stella Fosdick wants of him, but *Nick will be able to make a pretty good guess.* Tell Nick that he is up against a harder proposition than he ever encountered before, and that if he wants to save himself he'll have to *strike first* and *do it right.*'

"The letter is signed," Ted added, "'Don Pedro Pacheco.'"

Exclamations of astonishment greeted the reading of the communication.

"That's just what I wrote to you, Ted!" murmured Stella.

"How in blazes did this Don What's-his-name find out all that?" queried Ben Tremont.

"He found it out somehow," answered Ted, with a warning look at Bud. "It's enough for us that he knows."

"Who is this man Chislett that he's writin' to?" queried Kit.

"A spy of Nick o' the Night's, who used to work here at the Big Pima," replied Ted. "But Chislett is not here any longer. Pacheco sent a message to some representative of the gang in Phœnix that the letter was coming, the information was conveyed to Norris, and Norris arranged to have the mail-carrier held up and the letter taken by force. Inasmuch as Chislett isn't at the Big Pima any more, that was the only way Norris could get the letter."

"But why did you take the mail-carrier's place?" asked Stella, "and let the robbers secure a dummy mail-sack? Bud gave us that information on the quiet."

"I had another letter in the bogus bag," answered Ted; "it was addressed to this same Chislett and read practically the same up to where Pacheco tells Chislett the rough riders proceed to Tonto Basin by Bridger's Gap. I changed that to read that we would go by way of Death Notch, on Thursday, the tenth."

"That's to-morrow," said Kit.

"Exactly! And by to-morrow, boys, Nick Norris and his murderous gang will be skulking in Death Notch to cut us off. We'll be there, of course, but we'll go by a roundabout way and take the gang by surprise. Norris will expect us to come straight through the Notch, but we'll execute a flank movement and catch the rascals off their guard."

"Why did you change from Bridger's Gap to Death Notch?" asked Kit.

"There's rough, boulder-strewn country all around Death Notch," said Ted, "and so it will be easier for us to creep up unseen on Norris and his men. Bridger's Gap, on the other hand, does not offer such advantages. Right in the Gap the country is rough enough, but the surroundings are bare and sandy and would give us no chance to cover our movements. I found out all about this from a prospector in Phœnix early this morning. Have I got the matter right, Stella?" he added, appealing to the girl.

"You have it exactly right," said Stella. "Forewarned is forearmed, they say, and I don't see how such a clever plan as that can fail."

"When're we goin' ter straddle our nags an' hike?" queried Bud.

"I don't think there is anything to be gained by taking the trail before morning," said Ted.

"Three hours in the saddle will bring us to the Notch," said Stella. "As we're not expected to be there before to-morrow, it would be well, I reckon, not to get on the ground too early."

"Ben and Kit have their horses," went on Ted, "but Bud and I came in the motor-car, and——"

"I have anticipated that contingency," said Stella, "and have already spoken for two good mounts for you. There'll be nothing in the way of an early start in the morning."

"Then," said Ted, "if everything is understood, we might as well slip back into the camp. The rest of you had better go back together, as you came. I reached camp in disguise, and don't wish to have it known that I am here; so I'll slip in alone, and the super will take care of me."

After Ted had given the boys a word of caution, warning them not to do any talking even among themselves, the party broke up and went back to the mine.

The super's name was Gregg. He was a good fellow and was anxious to do everything he could to help the leader of the rough riders.

There was some speculation in camp as to what had become of Fritz Webber. His motor-car was in evidence, down by the corral where the horses were kept, but the mail-carrier seemed to have vanished out of the midst of the Big Pima settlement when he had entered the super's office to announce the robbery. It was generally supposed that Fritz had gone away to hunt bandits on his own hook.

Ted took his meals in Gregg's private office; and when night came on Gregg had a cot-bed made up for him.

All these precautions, taken by Ted to prevent any inkling of his shrewd plan from reaching Nick Norris through the medium of possible spies, may not have been necessary. But the King of the Wild West was proceeding on the theory that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

Stella, who was a friend of Mrs. Gregg, was quartered in the super's house—a homelike adobe on the brow of a low hill not far from the corral. Bud, Ben, and Kit were bunking on some bales of hay in the feed-barn, with saddles for pillows and with the rest of their riding-gear handy. The horses of the entire party were in the corral, all ready for catching up.

It had been arranged to get away from the Big Pima by five in the morning, well in advance of the hour that brought a change of shifts in the mine and mill; and when Ted crawled between the blankets of his cot, he was looking forward to a good night's rest as a preparation for the exciting work of the day following.

But he was destined to disappointment.

He was not long in accustoming himself to the roar of the twenty stamps in the gold-mill, and sank into a profound slumber.

Suddenly he was awakened. The throb of the stamps was echoing in his ears, and he wondered what it was that had brought him upright in his cot. Something out of the ordinary had disturbed him, of that he was sure.

He was not long in doubt. Presently the sharp crack of a revolver reached him, so tangled up with the thunder of the mill that it took a keen ear to detect it. Following the shot there came a cry, suddenly broken off as though muffled. Unless Ted was greatly deceived, a woman had raised the alarm, for the cry was shrill and piercing.

Flinging up a window, he thrust out his head and listened.

Was it only his imagination, or did he really hear the pounding of the motor-car?

A sound of running footsteps came from the gloom, close at hand.

"What's wrong?" demanded Ted.

"That you, Ted?" panted the voice of Ben Tremont.

"I was coming after you. Some one has run off with the motor-car."

"But I heard a cry—it sounded like the cry of a woman."

"So did I," replied Ben, "but I don't know anything about that part of it. There were also a couple of shots fired."

"I heard one of them. Get the horses ready." Ted began scrambling into his clothes.

"Bud and Kit are attending to that," answered Ben.

"Go up and call Stella. This may be a move by some of Nick Norris' men."

"I shouldn't wonder much," Ben answered, as he started on a run for the super's house.

By the time Ted reached the corral, Bud and Kit had five horses in readiness. They were the only persons in evidence, no one else seeming to have heard the commotion.

As Ted, Bud, and Kit swung to their saddles, Ben came racing through the darkness, followed by Gregg.

"Stella's not at the house!" Ben called excitedly.

"She has disappeared," added Gregg, "and neither my wife nor I heard a sound! That Norris is a night-prowler; do you think he——"

"I don't know what to think, Mr. Gregg," answered Ted, startled by the possibilities of the situation. "But if anything has happened to Stella we shall very soon know what it is. Spurs and quirts, boys," he added to the rough riders.

Ben Tremont rose to his saddle. There followed a rattle of spurs and a swish of quirts, and Ted and his brave boys were off at a tearing gallop.

CHAPTER VI.

A BRAVE GIRL'S PERIL.

Repeating rifles, provided by Stella herself the afternoon before, swung from the saddle-horns. The weapons had full magazines. In addition to the rifles, the rough riders had their six-shooters, and were amply prepared for any sort of a fracas that fate might send their way.

To say that Ted was astounded by this unexpected turn of affairs would hardly do justice to his feelings.

"Jumpin' sand-hills!" exclaimed Bud. "Nick o' the Night had spies in the camp, arter all!"

"It is well we took pains to cover our steps," answered Ted.

"If this Nick Norris injures a hair of that girl's head," boomed Ben Tremont fiercely, "we'll even up with him for his dastardly work!"

"Yes," echoed Kit Summers, "he'll find the rough riders in a different class from the people he's used to dealin' with."

"All I want," said Bud savagely, "is a hack at him—jest one."

Ted Strong said nothing, but if his face could have been seen at that moment there would have been no doubt as to his feelings.

They reached the fork in the trail. So far they were fairly certain that they were on the right track, but now they had come to a point where the motor-car could have turned either north or south on the Black Cañon road.

"I wisht I was a mind-reader," muttered Bud, as they all pulled rein.

Ted, still without speaking, threw his reins to Kit and jumped down from his horse.

A big Sahuara cactus grew near the forks of the trail. In a jiffy the leader of the rough riders had touched a lighted match to the dried spines of the Sahuara. A moment later the huge bole was aglow like so much tinder, lighting up the scene for yards around.

This gigantic torch answered the purpose admirably. In its glare Ted could clearly see the tracks of the pneumatic tires, trailing northward. There were also tracks leading to the south, but the car had left these at the time Ted and Bud had come to the Big Pima Mine.

"North it is, boys," said Ted briefly, as he vaulted again into his saddle.

"I don't know what bronks kin do agin' them gasoline-wagons," fretted Bud.

"In a flat country," Ted answered; "horse-flesh would be no match for a motor-car; but the country to the north is rough and the car will not be able to develop its best speed. And another thing," he added, after a moment, "the car will have to stick to the trail. To get off the trail would mean for it to get among the rocks, and into difficulties. We have a clear course ahead of us, and all we need to do is to ride."

Ted set the pace, and it was a rattling clip. Bud kept almost stirrup to stirrup with him, while Ben and Kit brought up the rear.

The horses were fresh, and it was clear that the two which Stella had selected for Ted and Bud had good speed and mettle. The mounts bestrode by Bud and Kit had been chosen from a herd in a Phœnix corral, and were the best of the lot.

The trail, for a few miles, was a gradual rise, clear of sand and bordered with rocks on either side. As the pursuers continued on the rise became more abrupt, the bordering rocks grew into immense boulders, and jagged hills appeared on right and left.

"It wasn't no one-man job, I kin tell ye thet!" declared Bud. "It took more'n one o' them hombres ter git clear o' the camp with Stella Fosdick."

"The thing has a mysterious look to me," answered Ted. "Stella, I think, must have done the shooting."

"If she did, ye kin gamble a blue stack both them bullets wasn't wasted. It ain't her style ter throw away ammunition."

"You didn't get a look at the car, did you?"

"Not me. One o' the shots wakes me up, an' when I jumps off'n the bale o' hay I was usin' fer a bunk, Ben was climbin' fer the barn door. I follered Ben, an' Kit follered me—but we didn't see nothin', an' all we heard was another shot— that same yell thet you heered, an' the 'chug, chug, chug' o' the gasoline-wagon. Kit an' me digs out fer the corral with our hoss trappin's, an' Ben starts arter you."

"You couldn't see that any one was hurt?"

"Thar wasn't no one layin' around whar thet motor-car had stood by the c'ral. If any one was hurt, they rode off in the thing."

By that time it was nearly four in the morning. For another hour the chase was continued, a slower pace being necessary on account of the difficulties of the trail, which were gradually increasing.

Considering the nature of the trail, it seemed to Ted as though he and his comrades ought to be making better time than the Red Flier.

The night was still, save for the wavering cries of dis-

tant coyotes and the thump of the broncos' hoofs in the flinty earth. On such a night it would have been easy to hear the automobile half a mile away, but not the least sound of its working machinery came to their ears.

Ted was on the point of calling a halt when his horse shied at something in the trail and reared backward. The suddenness of the bronco's move brought about a collision with Kit's mount, behind. Both riders got a shaking up, but otherwise no damage was done.

While Ted and Kit were getting their horses in hand again, Bud tumbled out of his saddle and picked up the object that had caused the disturbance. An exclamation broke from his lips.

"What is it, Bud?" asked Ted.

"A hat," replied Bud; "Stella's."

"Then there's no doubt about our being on the right track," said Ben.

"We're on the right track, all right," returned Kit, "but a whole lot could happen to the girl before we overhaul the motor-car."

"Stop yer croakin'," growled Bud, stuffing the hat in the breast of his coat and leaping to the back of his horse; "nothin's goin' ter happen to her."

"Just the same," said Ben, "it beats all how that car manages to keep ahead of us on such a rough trail."

"No use wasting any more time," said Ted sharply. "If we overhaul the Red Flier, we shall have to push on."

Again they started, urging their horses to the best pace they could get out of them. Morning advanced and gradually their range of vision increased.

Ahead of them the trail wound in and out, and up and down—still fairly good, but flanked by immense rocks and occasionally a cliff or a precipice.

Looking down into an abyss that yawned on the left, and then up at a sheer wall of granite a hundred feet high on the right, Ben remarked that it would take a steady hand and strong nerves to guide a motor-car through that part of the hills.

So hard was the road-bed that only now and then could the tracks left by the pneumatic tires be traced through narrow stretches of silt that had been blown across the way.

But it was not necessary to look for tracks in order to follow the car. There was only one way the car could go, and that was straight ahead. Turning to right or left was impossible.

Ted, spurring along well in the lead, was first to catch the sound of the motor-car's machinery.

"They're ahead, boys," he announced, "and not a great ways ahead, at that. I can hear the pounding of the car."

A faint cheer went up from the others. Goading their horses into a brisker pace, the rough riders began making ready for a possible fight.

At this exciting moment, luck went against Kit Summers. His horse suddenly went lame in a forward foot and slowed to a walk.

"He's picked up a stone," Ben called, over his shoulder. "Dig it out, Kit, and trail along after us."

Kit said things that emphasized his disappointment over the mishap, and slid from the saddle. Ted, Bud, and Ben raced on.

Presently they came out on a small elevation that overlooked a level, treeless stretch of ground. This little plateau broke off abruptly at a precipice, the trail turning away from the cliff's brink in a sharp curve and swinging around the scarp of an uplift.

So much the startled lads saw, as in a flash; but what froze their blood, and turned even the strongest of them pale, was a glimpse of the Red Flier, plunging along the road and headed straight for the edge of the cliff.

There was only one person aboard the car, and that one person was Stella.

She was bound upright to the seat of the vehicle, in such a manner as to be entirely helpless. Her long, yellow hair was flying out behind, borne by the speed of her flight toward a frightful doom.

With no hand to grip the steering-wheel and swerve the car from its course, the destruction of car and passenger seemed inevitable.

The distance between the car and the precipice was much less than the distance between the rough riders and the car. Not only that, but the Red Flier was going at a tremendous speed.

A groan was wrenched from the tense lips of Bud Morgan. Both he and Ben seemed paralyzed with the awful spectacle so suddenly conjured before their eyes.

But it was not so with Ted.

In a twinkling he saw the uselessness of attempting to overtake the car.

That was out of the question.

Only one other course remained—a forlorn hope at best—yet there was one chance in ten that it might succeed.

However, if the rough riders availed themselves of the chance there was not an instant to be lost.

"Ready with your Winchesters!" shouted Ted, grabbing his rifle from the pommel and digging in with the spurs at the same time. "Follow me—lively, now!"

His ringing voice awoke his dazed comrades. Taking heart, they scarcely knew why, Bud and Ben followed the lead of the King of the Wild West, racing after him and unslinging their rifles as they went.

Ted's keen eyes were watching the car, his steady brain measuring the distance between the whirling front wheels and the brink—measuring not only the distance, but the chances—awaiting the right moment for a decisive effort.

"Halt!" cried Ted. "Take aim!" he added, leveling his own gun as his horse recoiled after a cruel tug at the bit.

Bud and Ben hardly realized, as yet, what their leader had determined upon, or why he was aiming at the car.

"Shoot at the tires!" shouted the young King of the Wild West; "it is our only hope for saving the girl!"

In an instant it dawned upon Bud and Ben what Ted Strong was seeking to accomplish.

Ted's rifle volleyed; and close upon the heels of the wild echoes came the reports of Bud's gun, and then Ben's.

CHAPTER VII.

KIT'S PRISONER.

People have talked of whole eternities of time crowding themselves into a few brief seconds during some such ordeal as that then facing the rough riders. But never before had Ted Strong and his friends realized so forcibly that this could be.

Dreading lest the brave girl should vanish over the cliff

under their very eyes, they sat their horses like statues and watched for the results of their shots.

There had been but one chance in ten, but that single chance won the day.

The bursted tires of both wheels on that side of the machine served to deflect the Red Flier's course. It swerved to the left, the wheels on the other side just grazing the treacherous brink.

While Bud and Ben sat motionless, hardly daring to credit the evidence of their senses, Ted urged his horse forward, gained the side of the disabled car and flung himself into it from the saddle.

Another moment and he had shut off the power and applied the brakes.

Stella was pale as death, but perfectly calm and self-possessed.

"Ted!" she murmured. "I felt sure you would save me—not for one moment did I give up hope."

Now that it was all over, Ted's nerves were unstrung. Leaning back in the seat beside the girl he remained quiet for a few moments while regaining the whip-hand of himself.

"Jumpin' sand-hills!" cried Bud. "I reckon Ted has squared himself hyer in Arizona fer thet leetle trick ye pulled off in Idaho, Stella."

"No one else could have done it," said Ben, shooting an admiring glance at Ted, "no one else but the King of the Wild West."

"Nonsense!" said Ted, working at the cords that bound Stella to the seat. "I was scared about half to death for a minute or two. However did you happen to get in such a scrape as this, Stella?"

"I suppose," the girl answered slowly, "that my enemy, Nick o' the Night, is back of it all. Who else could be?"

"Was he the one who tied you to the seat and left the Red Flier to shift for itself?" demanded Ted, with a lowering brow.

"No, he was not one of the two men who set upon me, but it must be that the men were hirelings of his."

"I can readily believe that. How did it happen?"

"I was awakened from a sound sleep by some one tapping on my window. 'Who's there?' I asked. Then some one answered, 'Bud; I want to see you a minute.'

"I didn't think for a moment that it wasn't Bud. I thought he was bringing me some message from you, Ted. I got into my clothes as quickly as I could and went outside.

"The man was standing in the dark shadow of the house and I could not see him very plainly. 'What do you want, Bud?' I asked, stepping up to him.

"Just as I put the question a pair of arms went around me from behind and a hand was pressed over my lips. I'm pretty strong and wiry and began to struggle. Then the other man whom I had thought to be Bud took a hand in the game. Between them I wasn't able to do a thing.

"They half carried and half dragged me to the corral and loaded me into the automobile. I had left the house without my guns, but I managed to grab a revolver belonging to one of my captors.

"He grabbed my hand and the bullet was discharged into the air. It was a distress signal and I hoped some one would hear it."

"I heard it," put in Ted, "and so did the rest of the boys."

"I succeeded in firing two shots," the girl proceeded, "before the shooter was wrenched away from me. I also managed to call two or three times, which made the men very angry at me.

"'Give 'er the dope,' I heard one of them say.

"Then a cloth was pressed over my mouth and nose, and I inhaled the fumes of some drug or other and lost consciousness.

"When I came to myself I was bound to the seat, the car was plunging onward at a terrific speed, and there was only one man with me.

"I tried to find out who the fellow was, and where he was taking me, but his only answer to my question was a stern command to keep still.

"I don't believe we were on the road many hours, but it seemed to me like a frightfully long time. Then morning came, and presently we heard hoof-beats behind us.

"The man swore furiously, and in a minute or two jumped out of the car and rushed off among the rocks. Utterly powerless to attend to the car in any way, I knew that if you did not overhaul me there would be a wreck, or some worse disaster. Still, somehow, I never gave up hope of being rescued; not even when I saw that precipice yawning almost at the front wheels."

"You had a mighty close call of it, Stella," said Ted. "It would have been impossible for us to reach the car before it went over the cliff; and if we had come up with it I don't know what we could have done. The only thing we could do was to draw rein and puncture the tires with our bullets. When the air went out, it caused the car to wobble and swerve from its course. Luck was with us, all around."

"It glooms me up a heap," said Bud, "ter think thet any feller packed the narve ter fool Stella by lettin' on he was me. Say, if I ever come within arm's reach o' thet feller, ye kin bet I go pawin' fer trouble!"

Ted's mind was on another phase of the matter.

"Did you hear any talk between the two men, Stella?" he asked.

"Nothing of any consequence," she answered.

"You don't know what became of the second man?"

"No. He got out of the car some time after I had been drugged and tied to the seat."

"Have you any idea that they are onto that game of ours at Death Notch?"

"That's too many for me, Ted. We're on the trail to the Notch, and it may be that there is where the man was taking me."

"As soon as he saw we were after the car, he headed straight for the cliff and jumped out?"

"Yes. Evidently he was planning to prevent a rescue."

The faces of the rough riders grew dark and forbidding, as they listened.

"I suppose," said Ted, "we might as well keep right on to the Notch, if we are headed that way."

"If we do," put in Stella, "I'll have to ride with one of you boys."

"I reckon we could both git along on the same hoss, Stella," said Bud.

"I don't think it will be necessary to do that," observed Ted. "We might keep on with the Red Flier."

"Those two bursted tires put the Red Flier out of the running," remarked Ben.

"Of course," said Ted, "if we had to use the wheels as they are. But we don't."

Getting out of the car, he ransacked the bottom of it and brought out a couple of new tires.

"Fritz Webber," Ted went on, "carries a number of supplies with him to guard against break-downs. In an hour we'll have the Red Flier ready for the road."

Ted threw off his coat preparatory to getting to work.

"Bud," said he, as he opened the tool-box and proceeded to get out some tools, "you go back along the trail and look for Kit. It seems as though he's a long while catching up with us. After you find him, try and see where the fellow went that jumped out of the car. Ben will stay here and help me put on the new tires."

"I'll go with Bud," said Stella, "providing Ben will let me take his horse."

"Sure," answered Ben. "You'd better take this, too," he added, handing Stella one of his six-shooters.

"I should think your nerves would be in rags, Stella," said Ted, "and that you'd want to rest awhile."

"Not me," she laughed. "I'm no tenderfoot, Ted—you ought to know that."

She swung herself lightly into Ben's saddle.

"All ready, Bud?" she asked.

"I'm Ready's hull fambly."

"Then let's be off."

"Clap this on thet head o' your'n, pard," said Bud, handing the girl her hat as they rode away.

"Game as a hornet, ain't she?" remarked Ben, when the two riders had disappeared.

"She's a regular brick!"

"Bud is all gone on her, if a fellow can judge by appearances."

"I don't blame him much, Ben. Do you?"

"You bet I don't!"

The two rough riders fell to work and, within an hour, had the pneumatic tires in place and ready for use.

Just as they were giving the finishing touches to their work, Stella, Bud, and Kit appeared. Kit was walking and leading his horse, which was hobbling painfully. Ahead of the party marched a man with a grizzled beard and weather-beaten face. Those behind were driving him on with the points of their revolvers.

"Great Scott!" cried Ben. 'They've got a prisoner."

"Kit caught the fellow," said Stella. "All we are doing is helping to bring him in."

"Is he the man who——"

"Who jumped out of the Red Flier and left me headed for the edge of the cliff? Yes, Ted, he's the one. I'm having all I can do to keep the boys from making a target out of the scoundrel."

CHAPTER VIII.

ON TO THE NOTCH!

Threatened by the revolvers in the hands of the rough riders, the prisoner shambled forward until he stood in front of the King of the Wild West. The man's shifty eyes rested eagerly on the Red Flier, as though he should like to jump into the car and make a desperate break for liberty.

"Draw your guns, Ben," said Ted, "and get into the car. I want a few words with this fellow, and if he tries any foolishness we'll be in a position to checkmate him."

"He won't make off with the Red Flier," growled Ben, shooting a savage glance at the prisoner while gaining the driver's seat.

"Where did you find him, Kit?" Ted went on, to Summers.

"Back on the trail," answered Kit. "You had gone on, and I was trying to tinker up my horse when the fellow suddenly plunged out into the road right ahead of me. I called on him to halt, but he wouldn't. Instead of that, he plunged back into the rocks again. Of course, I chased after him, and we had a merry scramble for a mile or more through the rough country.

"When I got too close to him for comfort he ducked behind a rock, and opened up with his artillery. I picked out a rock for myself, and began wasting a little ammunition on my own account.

"But it wasn't any use—I couldn't get him and he couldn't get me, blazing away in that fashion. I fixed up my hat on a rock, just so that he could see the crown of it, then crawled off through the boulders until I could take him in the rear.

"You'd have laughed to see the way the fellow was watching the crown of my hat, while I was directly behind him. Every once in awhile he would take a shot at the head-gear. Left his mark, too," added Kit, pulling off his hat and showing a couple of holes in the top of it.

"All the while he was pluggin' away and watching, I was crawling up on him," Kit continued. "When I got close enough, I did the catamount act and made a jump. Was he surprised? Well, now, I don't think I could begin to tell you how surprised he was. I had him down and out in half a minute; and when I jumped back his guns were in my hands.

"I poked him back to the trail with the muzzles, and just as we came out on the right-of-way Bud and Stella rode up, and we exchanged greetings. Bud was for shooting the man, out of hand; and, when Stella told me what the fellow had done, I was sorry I hadn't used a couple of bullets on him instead of my hands."

It was the modest recital of a piece of plucky work. But it was like Kit to do things and make little of them.

"What is your name?" asked Ted, facing the prisoner sternly.

"Chislett," was the sullen response.

"Hank Chislett?"

"Ye've struck it."

"Who was the other man that was with you in the car?"

"Don't know."

"Where did he go?"

"Don't know that, either."

"He talks like an ijut," cried Bud. "If he don't answer yore questions, Ted, jest give me lief ter open up on him, will ye?"

"Keep your guns in their holsters, Bud," said Ted.

"Well, if thet's the way ye feel, all right. But I got a hankerin' ter let a patch o' daylight inter thet handy-boy, an'——"

"You belong to this Tonto Basin Mining Company," went on Ted, giving Chislett a square look.

"I don't. I useter work at the Big Pima."

"You're working for Nick Norris."

"Who's Nick Norris?"

Ted turned away in disgust.

"Rope him," said Ted, "and throw him into the car. We're only wasting time here."

Chislett was bound by Kit and Bud, and not very tenderly treated as he went through their hands. Then he was placed aboard the Red Flier.

"Kit," went on Ted, "you can ride my horse and lead your own. Stella and I will use the motor-car. Do you know of any water-hole in this vicinity, Stella?" the young leader of the rough riders added.

"There's a rancher about a mile from here," said Stella. "He has a well."

"On the Black Cañon trail?"

"Yes."

"Can the man be trusted?"

"I have known him for a long time, and he's a good friend of mine."

As Stella dismounted from Ben's horse she handed over the borrowed revolver.

"Keep it," said Ben. "I have another six-shooter, as well as a Winchester."

"I have Chislett's revolvers," returned the girl. "They're forty-fours, and Bud and Kit supplied me with cartridges."

As soon as they had changed around, the party headed for the rancher's, the Red Flier leading the way and the horsemen following.

Chislett was lying quietly across the car at the feet of Stella and Ted. There was a wolfish glitter in his upturned eyes.

"All Chislett wants," said Stella, "is a chance. Give him that, and he'll try something desperate."

"If he makes any sort of a break," said Ted, "he'll have short shrift to the other world. I haven't any patience to waste on the villain."

A quarter of an hour later they descended into a little valley among the hills. Here a man had bored a well, built himself a shack, and was tilling a small patch of rich soil, which was irrigated from his water-supply.

He was a tall, lank individual, but he had an honest face, and greeted Stella warmly.

"We want to water our stock here, Mr. Billings," said Stella, "and rest up for an hour or so. If we could raid your grub-box for a square meal all around, we'll be glad to make it right with you."

"Whatever I got around the place is your'n," said Billings. "As fer payin' me anythin', I'm dumbed ef Stella kin do it. I'm right glad ter be able ter help ye. Who air yer friends, Stella?"

Stella presented her companions, but told Billings not to mention their coming that way if any chance visitor should drop in after they had left.

"How about leaving our prisoner with you, Mr. Billings?" asked Ted.

The rancher had been eying Hank Chislett for some time with growing curiosity.

"Whar'd ye git him?" Billings asked.

Ted, aided by a word from the girl now and then, made the matter clear.

"Nick Norris is bad medicine," said Billings. "He an' his minin' comp'ny don't hev much ter do with me, although some on 'em happen around 'casionally fer a supply o' water. I reckon I kin take keer o' the pris'ner all right, howsumever. Tote 'im inter the house."

Bud and Ben carried Chislett into the shack.

"Drap 'im down thar," said Billings, opening a trap in the floor. "It's whar I keep my pertaters. Better put a gag on 'im fust, though."

A handkerchief was twisted between the prisoner's jaws, his bonds were examined to see that they were secure, and he was tumbled into the hole under the floor.

After that the horses were attended to, and Billings, assisted by Stella, set about preparing a meal for the hungry boys.

A rest of two hours and a hearty meal freshened the party wonderfully. When they resumed their journey toward the Notch, they were fit for anything, and had no prisoner and no lame horse to encumber their movements.

Stella was thoroughly familiar with the road, so the Red Flier continued to keep the lead. The trail was poor, but the motor-car had been built for rough work, and did very well, considering.

"Do you know anything about these machines, Stella?" asked Ted.

"I'll bet I could run this one as well as anybody," the girl answered.

"There are mighty few things you can't do," said Ted, giving the girl an admiring glance. "Even to making a conquest of Bud," he added, with a laugh.

"Bud is a good fellow," said Stella, "but I'm not trying to make any conquests of that kind."

"It ought to come easy for you, if you ever made up your mind to try."

Ted's eyes rested on her fair face for a moment—just long enough to note her mantling blushes—then swerved to the trail ahead.

"Do you mean that, Ted?" she asked softly.

"Sure I do."

"I don't believe I ever saw any one that I cared for particularly, except——" She paused.

"Except who?"

"I'm not going to tell. What's the use, anyhow? I am always going to be single, and always do what I can for the cause of law and order in the West."

"Don't you think, Stella, that that's a man's work? You're altogether too pretty and charming to mix up in it."

"Mercy!" she exclaimed. "You don't mean to say that you're going to preach to me?"

"I couldn't preach to any one if I wanted to; but I——well, I think a heap of you, Stella, and—and——"

"And what?" urged the girl, bending nearer to him, her eyes shining and her face still flushed.

"Oh, nothing!" Ted exclaimed abruptly, apparently vexed with himself.

Stella seemed disappointed. Settling back in her seat, she remained silent for some time.

"I don't think any one ever thought very much of me, except my brother," said she, at last, in a sad voice. "I suppose Mr. McFarland told you something about him, didn't he?"

"A little," Ted answered.

"He was a fine fellow, older than I by two years. He was the expert at the cyanide works at the Big Pima, and I was attending school in Phœnix. I used to go out to the mine often to see him, and he would always ride back to town with me.

"The last time we made the trip"—her voice trembled slightly—"Roy had a couple of bars of bullion to take to the Phœnix bank. I felt as though something was going to happen, and something *did* happen. While we were in the hills, and before we reached the Arizona canal, we were halted by three men. They wore masks, and commanded Roy to give up the bullion.

"For answer, he drew a revolver. A man caught his hand, and the gun was discharged into the air. I had no weapon of my own, but I was close to the leader of the

bandits, and tried to catch a weapon out of his belt. He struck at me with his fist, and the sight so enraged Roy that he tore loose from the fellow who was holding him and threw himself upon the leader.

"During the struggle the leader's mask came off, and I had a good look at his face. A second later there was a revolver-shot, and Roy fell to the ground. The leader fired the shot—I saw that much; but, after that, I was so overcome that I hardly know what I did, or what happened. When I realized where I was, I was alone with Roy. The robbers were gone, and so was the bullion. My brother was dead."

The girl struggled with her emotions for a space, and Ted preserved a sympathetic silence. When his companion had somewhat recovered, he asked:

"The leader of those three men was Nick Norris?"

"From the description I gave of him, Sheriff McFarland says that he must be. I could identify the man anywhere. If some one else can identify him as Nick o' the Night, he will go to the gallows."

Following this they continued to ride in silence, both busy with their thoughts. At last Stella aroused herself and pointed off to the north, over the jagged boulders that lay in front of them. They were on a slight elevation, and able to see a long way in advance.

"Do you see that opening yonder?" the girl asked; "the one that looks as though it had been notched out of the mountain with a knife?"

"Yes," said Ted.

"That is Death Notch."

As Ted gazed toward the Notch, he saw something else—a black speck on the crest of an uplift. Bringing the automobile to a halt, he continued to gaze, calling the girl's attention to the object.

Another speck arose beside the first.

"I shouldn't wonder," said the girl, "if they are horsemen. Perhaps they are sentinels, posted by Norris to apprise him of our approach."

"If that's the case," said Ted, in a troubled tone, "our attack on the villains is not going to be a surprise."

"The riders are coming this way!" the girl exclaimed. "They are off the hill now, and down in the valley below."

"It may be," said Ted, "that they are expecting Chislett, and are coming to meet him."

The very thought set Ted's wits to work. Bud, Ben, and Kit were behind, some little distance, and Ted turned in his seat and called to them.

"Two horsemen are coming this way," said the King of the Wild West, "and I don't know but they are coming to meet Chislett. Like as not, they are expecting Chislett to bring Stella, and that last night's work at the Big Pima Mine was planned by Nick Norris. Get out of sight among the rocks, boys. If the layout is anything like I suspect, we'll try a trick on those two riders."

As Bud, Ben, and Kit proceeded to hunt hiding-places, and get themselves out of sight, Ted added:

"Don't show up until I give the yell. If this unexpected meeting leads to anything, I'll give you all a chance to take a hand in it."

"What are you intending to do, Ted?" inquired Stella.

"I am going to make a bluff at being Chislett—a poor bluff, but it may work until those men get close enough to us so that we can see who they are, and perhaps learn their business."

While speaking, he had drawn from under the seat the fore-and-aft cap and the rough coat which he had worn while impersonating Fritz Webber.

Ted did not intend to pose as the mail-carrier this time, but what he wanted was something to cover his rough-rider clothes. He slipped the other coat on over the one he wore, and replaced his slouch hat with the cap.

"That's the best I can do," said he. "If I had suspected anything like this was going to happen, I'd have borrowed Chislett's costume. However," he added, "I think it will take a close-range scrutiny to make a rough rider out of me."

"What am I to do, Ted?" asked the girl.

"You are to pretend that you are a prisoner. Lay those revolvers on the seat beside you, and hide them with a fold of your skirt. Put your hands over the back of the seat."

As the girl followed out his instructions, Ted picked up the rope that Chislett had used in tying her and laid it about her waist, to give her the appearance of being secured.

"I don't like to have you in this, little girl," said Ted.

"Why not?" she demanded.

"Because I don't want to expose you unnecessarily if there should be any shooting."

She laughed softly.

"You ought to know by this time, Ted," said she, "that I am able to look after myself. Besides, you couldn't fool those fellows if I wasn't along. They are expecting Chislett to bring me. If I wasn't here, the chances are they wouldn't come."

Ted had already gone over this point in his mind. Stella's presence was absolutely necessary for the success of the ruse.

He did not start the Red Flier again, but held it motionless on the crest of the uplift, straining his eyes northward for another glimpse of the two horsemen.

Finally he saw them, nearer and much plainer now, galloping along the rough trail in their direction.

Stella murmured something under her breath.

"What is it?" asked the young rough rider.

"Unless I am badly mistaken," was the reply, "one of those horseman is Nick o' the Night!"

CHAPTER IX.

QUICK WORK.

If Stella was correct in her surmise, then certainly the rough riders were having an extraordinary run of luck. As the two riders decreased the distance separating them from the Red Flier, Ted looked them over sharply.

One was swarthy and looked as though he might be a Mexican. Yet, whatever his nationality, he bore the indelible stamp of a border ruffian and cutthroat.

The other man was younger and of a lithe and graceful figure. He had black hair, a handsome face and, while he wore an ornate Mexican costume, was plainly American.

Both riders were well armed and came slashing onward as though without the slightest suspicion that they were facing enemies.

Suddenly, at a command from the younger man, both drew quick rein. It was evident that they had seen something they could not understand.

They had halted nearly a hundred yards down the

slope, on the crest of which the motor-car was standing. Here they entered into a short conversation, frequently looking up the hillside toward the two in the car.

At last the younger of the two men drew away from his companion.

"Is that Nick Norris, Stella?" asked Ted, in a low tone.

"He's the man that killed my brother," breathed the girl, her eyes gleaming like diamonds. "The sheriff says he is Norris."

"Who are you?" Norris called out from below.

"Thet's jest what I was goin' ter ask you," answered Ted, assuming a roughness of voice and manner. "Ye better stand whar ye air! I ain't goin' ter budge from this hyer spot till I know what yer bizness is."

"Where did you come from?" persisted Norris.

"Looky hyer, stranger," yelled Ted, "if ye're a deperty sher'f, er anythin' like thet, ye don't want no truck with me. Savvy?"

"I'm no deputy sheriff," was the reply, in a conciliatory tone, that proved Ted was making an impression. "Where did you come from? There is something here that I can't just understand."

"I come from ther Big Pima Mine. And torkin' erbout things ye kain't understand, thar's quite a few thet's botherin' me this minit."

"Is that girl beside you Stella Fosdick?"

"Say, I was told not ter answer any questions till I got to the Notch. Some 'un was ter show up thar, an' if he told me who he was, an' told it right, I'd know I wasn't bein' fooled with. I ain't got the least idee who you fellers aire thet comes breezing up ter me like this."

"Where's the other man?"

"D'ye mean Hank Chislett?"

"Yes."

"Waal, Hank got captered by the rough riders."

"Captured?" was the startled response.

"Ain't I tellin' ye? I was delegated ter push on ter the Notch with the gal, an' turn her over ter the feller thet give me the right name. An' thet's what I'm er goin' ter do, by hokey!"

Once more the two horsemen put their heads together and had some more talk.

"That's all right, my man," the younger of the two called out. "I'm the one who was to meet you in the Notch."

"Ye say ye aire, but I'm blamed ef I know till ye gi'me yer name."

"My name's Norris, Nick Norris."

"Then I reckon ye're the feller. But, say! Tell me somethin' erbout Chislett, fust. Then I'll know fer sure."

"Chislett was working for me. He and Pete Dinsmore were to get the girl away from the Big Pima, if they could. Now are you satisfied?"

"I reckon thet'll do. Shall I turn the pris'ner over to ye right hyer?"

"You might as well."

At that precise moment Ted noticed a number of black specks far away toward the Notch. The specks were moving rapidly in the direction of the car.

"It looks as though the rest of the mining company were riding in this direction," said he, in a grim undertone, to Stella.

The girl nodded her head slightly to signify that she understood. At that moment, the prospect for trouble was particularly bright.

Nick Norris and his companion had started on up the slope. As they drew near they separated, one riding on each side of the car.

"Are you a friend of Chislett's?" asked Norris, sweeping a keen eye over Ted.

"Señor Norris!" suddenly cried the man who looked like a Mexican, pointing toward the rope that lay about Stella's waist and over the back of the seat. "Dis ees *muy malo!* De mujercita ees not bound—she only seem! *Cospetto!*"

With the last word, the speaker fell from his horse as if by magic—fell on the opposite side from that presented to the car and its passengers. Stella, observing that matters had come to a show-down, had pulled her hands in front of her and grasped her revolvers. Only by the celerity with which he had interposed his horse as a breastwork did the Mexican save himself.

About the same instant his companion discovered that the girl was not bound. Norris had made the discovery that Ted had a slouch hat in the bottom of the car and was wearing a rough-rider uniform.

Crack! Norris drew and fired one of his revolvers with amazing suddenness.

The bullet cut the air between Stella's head and Ted's —so close to the young rough rider that his cheek was almost burned.

Ted pressed the rubber bulb operating the motor-car's horn. Norris' mount, frightened by the sound, reared backward, unseating its rider.

"Keep off the other man, Stella!" shouted Ted, springing out of the vehicle and upon the prostrate form of Nick o' the Night, at the same time giving vent to the rough-rider yell.

The yell was answered lustily, and Bud, Ben, and Kit came dashing from among the rocks and raced for the scene of the disturbance.

By the time the boys had reached the spot, two things had happened: Ted, after a brief but exciting struggle, had gained the whip-hand of Norris, and the Mexican had vaulted recklessly to the back of his horse and careered away.

The mechanism of one of Stella's revolvers went wrong, or the rascal would not have had such an easy time of it. The three mounted rough riders started in pursuit of the fleeing rascal and might have overtaken him if Ted had not called them back.

"Here," called Ted, "there is not a second to lose. The rest of Nick Norris' gang is bearing down on us and they outnumber us three to one, at least. Get that rope from the car! We must make sure of this man, for he's the one we are after."

Bud, Ben, and Kit tumbled out of their saddles and made haste to secure the person of Norris.

The man fought like a wildcat and it was all the boys could do to get ropes on his wrists and ankles. Barely had they succeeded in this when a spattering volley came from down the trail.

The range was too great, and the bullets fell short. But the marksmen, a dozen of them, were riding on, and it would not be long before they would be in range, and perhaps do murderous work unless circumvented.

Nothing could ever rattle Ted Strong. On the contrary, his brain cleared as dangers thickened.

He saw the pack of mounted scoundrels rushing to the

rescue of their leader, and he was not long in deciding what was to be done.

Norris' horse had galloped riderless away the instant his rider dismounted. Ted had had his eye on the animal, but the struggle with Nick o' the Night had prevented him from getting hands on the bits. Now the horse could not be considered a factor in the game.

"Throw Norris into the car!" ordered Ted. "Stella," he added, while this was being done, "take the driver's seat. Ben, get into the car with Stella. It's up to you to hit the trail and keep Norris from being rescued by the rest of the gang."

"But here," cried Ben, "I want a hand in this scrimmage. You are few enough——"

Ben's words were bit short by another volley, the bullets this time flying dangerously close.

"Into the car, I tell you!" roared Ted.

"What are you going to do?" queried Stella, as she started the motive-power and turned the car around.

Ted was already climbing into Ben's saddle.

"We're the rear guard," said the King of the Wild West, "and will do our best to beat off Norris' men. Pay no attention to us, but keep right on until you land Norris in the Phœnix jail. Top speed! Everything depends on what you do."

The car leaped away, and vanished below the crest of the uplift.

"Ride in among the boulders!" was Ted's next order. "Unlimber your Winchesters—we must keep those scoundrels back."

Ted, Bud, and Kit were but three against a dozen; but they made breastworks of the boulders and plunged confidently into the work cut out for them.

CHAPTER X.

A MISHAP.

In sending Ben away with Stella in the car Ted had depleted his force, which was slender enough at best. Yet he could not think of sending the girl on the long, dangerous ride, with a desperate prisoner, entirely alone. As Ted had figured it, Ben could look after Nick Norris, and Stella could look after the car.

From behind the rocks the three rough riders began popping away with their rifles.

At the first volley one of the villains reeled in his saddle and fell sprawling into the trail, a second dropped his six-shooter and gripped his wrist, while a third cast aside his weapons and caught at the pommel of his saddle.

Such accurate firing caused the horsemen to stop their headlong dash. Turning their horses about, they put back until they were out of range, carrying the fallen man with them.

"I reckon thet'll give 'em somethin' ter think about, eh, Ted?" called Bud, from across the trail.

"They'll be more careful in making their next attack," answered Ted. "We must hold them in check and give the Red Flier a chance to get over the worst part of the trail."

"We can do that without any trouble," said Kit confidently. "The odds against us, though, are pretty heavy."

"They ain't quite so heavy now as they was, Kit," said Bud grimly. "Thet was shore a blue-ribbon play ye made, Ted. It's funny what things'll happen when ye ain't lookin' fer 'em, ain't it?"

"We're having our battle here instead of at the Notch," remarked Ted.

During his talk with his comrades he was keeping vigilant eyes on the Tonto Basin outfit. Not one of their movements escaped him.

"It was Nick o' the Night that put up Chislett ter try thet game at ther Big Pima," came from Bud.

"We know that, now," returned Ted. "Norris and one of his men saw us coming in the car and rode out here to meet us. Everything seems to be coming our way this trip."

"Everything generally does come Ted Strong's way, in the long run," asserted Kit.

"We'll have some backsets, never fear about that," said Ted. "But I hope the backsets will happen to us, and that Stella and Ben will get Norris to Phœnix without any trouble."

"It looks like them hombres down there had made up their minds what they're goin' ter do," observed Bud.

The Tonto Basin men had been holding a council. There were nine of them still fit for battle, and these nine were now dismounting.

The two men who had been wounded had bandaged their hurts and remained in their saddles, holding the horses of the others.

"They're a fine-lookin' lot o' scallerwags, ain't they, now?" queried Bud. "They're up ter any dodge thet's crool, crafty, an' safe, if I knows ther brand."

Bud had called the turn exactly right. Nick o' the Night's followers were as evil a looking set of men as Ted had ever set eyes on. Their number was about evenly made up of outcast whites, half-breeds, and greasers.

"Great Scott!" muttered Ted. "It looks to me like they were going to take to the rocks and circle around back of our position."

"They haven't got no more hoss-sense than ther law allows," grunted Bud. "I wonder if they opine we're goin' ter stay hyer like a passel o' chumps an' let 'em git where they kin pick us off at their ease?"

"I know a trick worth two of the one they are playing," said Ted. "Let them go on with their plan. Be ready, and when I give the word, rush down the trail, making as much noise as you can."

"I see yer p'int, Ted," chuckled Bud.

"So do I," added Kit, "and it's a good one."

Five—ten—fifteen minutes passed. By that time the nine dismounted men were well into the boulders, crawling like lizards from point to point and occasionally rising from shelter to launch a bullet.

"Now's the time, boys," called Ted, taking a grip on his bridle-reins. "Come on!"

Away they clattered, whooping like a lot of Comanches and firing revolvers into the air. A straight course was laid for the horses of the Tonto Basin men.

As Ted had expected, these animals took fright, reared, and broke from the hands of the men who were holding them, and darted pell-mell to the northward.

Yells of dismay came from the men among the boulders. In laying their plans they had not thought that the rough riders might attempt to stampede their horses.

The wounded men dug in with the irons and raced after the loose animals, not so much to recover them as to save themselves.

"That will do," said Ted, pulling up when the last horse had disappeared over the "rise." "I reckon we've saved the day for the Red Flier. Before this Tonto Basin layout can get their nags, Stella and Ben will be so far away they can't be overhauled. Now it's up to us to rush back along the trail. There'll be shooting from both sides of the road, and the only way we can win out is by making ourselves as small as we can and riding as fast as our bronks can go."

As a matter of fact, the critical moment was ahead of the rough riders. Between them and the course they must follow were nine desperate men, screened among the rocks and smarting under their recent reverses.

"We'll make it, with ground ter spare!" declared Bud.

"Sure," added Kit heartily. "Luck has stood by us ever since we struck Arizona. It won't go back on us now."

Then the backward dash commenced, bullets snarling through the air all about the dauntless three. Leaning well forward along the necks of their horses, the lads raced through a hail of lead.

They were compelled to climb the slope of the hill, which made anything extra in the way of speed an impossibility. Yet the horses did nobly, nevertheless.

Suddenly a sharp cry came from Kit.

"Are you hit?" cried Ted anxiously.

"Winged, that's all," replied the gallant fellow; "nothing to speak of."

A moment later Bud's hat-brim was pierced and the hat itself turned half around on his head.

"Jumpin' sand-hills!" taunted Bud, shaking his fist defiantly. "They shoot like a lot o' 'Pachie squaws."

"We're close to the top of the hill," called Ted encouragingly. "Once over that and we're safe from——"

At that precise moment Ted's horse went down under him, hurling Ted clear of the saddle. He shot through the air as though launched from a catapult, and fell head first upon the stones that thickly strewed the trail.

Then night closed in for the King of the Wild West, and he knew no more.

CHAPTER XI.

HELD BY THE ENEMY.

When Ted Strong drifted back to earth once more he found himself stretched out on a Navajo blanket. For a few moments he had difficulty in piecing together the events that had gone before, but gradually his benumbed brain assumed its normal functions.

His head ached terribly, and he put up one hand to find his forehead swathed in a bandage. He was in a house, a small house built of stone, containing one room and having beaten clay for a floor.

A rank odor of tobacco smoke permeated the air, and, in his weakened condition, caused a feeling of nausea.

A rough-looking man, with a rifle across his knees, sat just within the outside door. But he was paying little attention to Ted. His eyes were directed toward the other end of the room.

Just at that moment the young rough rider was too weak to pay further attention to his surroundings. He attempted to change his position and ease his cramped limbs, but found that he could not do so, owing to a set of ankle-irons which were made fast to his feet and secured to a ball and chain.

Closing his eyes he lay back and rested.

Where were Bud and Kit? Had Ben and Stella got clear with the Red Flier and their prisoner?

Although Ted realized that he was captured, and at the mercy of desperate foes, yet he experienced a thrill of exultation at the thought that Nick Norris, the leader of this Tonto Basin crowd, would soon be brought to book for his many crimes.

Fortune had befriended the leader of the rough riders up to the time of that mishap in the Black Cañon trail.

In spite of his forlorn situation, Ted did not complain. He was merely experiencing the fortunes of war; and he would far and away prefer to be captured himself rather than to have Bud or Kit experience the same hard luck.

Presently he became aware that a conversation was going forward in the end of the room farthest from the outside door. Turning his head slightly he peered in that direction.

A table was drawn up before a window, and a man in a tattered blue shirt and well-worn "chaps" was sitting in front of it. The man held a pencil in his hand and had just been writing.

At the end of the table another man was seated—a low-browed, bull-necked ruffian who puffed at a cob pipe and kept his beady eyes on the man with the pencil.

"Got 'er done, have ye, Bill?" queried the man, with the pipe.

"I reckon I hev," replied Bill. "Mebby she ain't spelled jest like she ort ter be—I was born book-shy as I think ye know—but I reckon she'll do, Kanuck."

"I reckon she'll have ter do," growled Kanuck. "Read 'er out loud."

"I've addressed it to ther gal," went on Bill, picking up a sheet from the table. "Ef she stops at the Big Pima, like I opine she will, it kin be delivered to 'er thar."

"Mebby she'll hev ter go ter the sher'f."

"We're up a stump, then. The sher'f ain't compoundin' any felony jest ter help a man out o' a scrape. If, as I b'leeve, the gal is stuck on the pris'ner, we kin do more with her than we kin with the sher'f."

"That's right. Well, fire away with yer paper talk."

"Hyer's the way she reads, then: 'Stella Fosdick, at the Big Pima Mine. I reckon we fell down a little terday, in some of our doin's, but we evened up by baggin' Ted Strong, the feller thet's called King o' the Wild West. We got 'im proper, an' the only way he kin git clear o' us is by your exchangin' Nick Norris fer him. If Ted Strong's life is worth anythin' ter his friends,

they kin save it by bringin' Nick o' the Night ter the Notch, an' leavin' him thar. Which is about all, from Nick Norris' men.' "

Bill laid the paper down and looked over at Kanuck.

"Thet's the way she stacks up," said Bill. "Think she'll do?"

"She's all right. I reckon they'll made a trade, Bill. Ted Strong is purty well known in the West an' he's worth more alive than Nick 'u'd be with his boots on. We got the trump-card, an' I'll bet two bits er double eagles we pull in the trick. Start one o' the boys fer the Big Pima with thet letter as soon as ye kin."

Bill arose from the table and started for the door.

"Just a moment," interposed Ted.

Kanuck exploded an oath, and Bill jumped back astonished.

"Come to, hev ye?" growled Kanuck.

"Yes."

"Ye might jest as well doze off ag'in. We ain't goin' ter bother much with ye until we find out whether the propersition we make is accepted er not."

"Wait a second," Ted went on to Bill. Then he added, addressing Kanuck: "How do you know I'm Ted Strong, of the rough riders?"

"We found enough plunder about yer clothes ter identify ye. Ye're a foxy boy, all right, Ted, an' the way ye pulled the wool over Nick's eyes is more'n I kin account fer. But we got ye; an' ef yer friends don't want ter see ye cut off in yer youth an' bloom, they got ter do the right thing by Nick."

"They will not let Norris go, if that's what you mean. You might as well save yourselves the trouble of sending that letter."

"We'll give the letter a try-out, anyways. Don't try ter interfere. We don't feel none too peaceable to'rds ye, as it is, an' yore cue is ter sing small an' wait fer things ter happen."

Ted, seeing that argument was useless, did not say anything more, but allowed Bill to pass out of the house with his letter.

Perhaps it was just as well to allow the ruffians to indulge a false hope. In the meantime, Ted would experience better treatment, let the end be what it might.

The messenger who carried the letter would not find Stella at the mine; she and Ben had been told to continue on to Phœnix, and that was what they would undoubtedly do.

It was quite possible that if Stella and the other rough riders were confronted with an issue like that laid down in Bill's letter, they might yield to the demands of the "Tonto Basin Mining Company."

Ted knew that Stella had a deep regard for him—so deep that it might lead her to forget the debt she owed Norris in order to insure Ted's safety and liberty.

Nevertheless, Ted was fairly certain the girl would have no chance to decide the matter. If Norris' followers persisted in their efforts to secure an "exchange" they would have to send their messenger on to Phœnix for an interview with Sheriff McFarland.

McFarland, knowing his duty, would follow it to the bitter end. He could do nothing else.

Several ruffians drifted into the house after Bill left, probably drawn to the room by the news that the prisoner had recovered his senses. They were savagely disposed toward Ted, and it was clear that only the hope of helping their leader regain his freedom kept them from an immediate act of violence.

So these, Ted thought, were the scoundrels who, in order to protect their leader, had plotted against Stella Fosdick. How the rogues could ever palm themselves off as members of a respectable mining company was more than Ted could fathom. Their very appearance bespoke them as equal to the darkest crimes.

"It's scand'lous," said Kanuck, "the way you an' yer rough riders hev been interferin' with decent people. Hyer we aire, out in the sand an' cactus, tryin' ter make an' honest livin', an' you hev ter come along an' go ter shootin' us up. Ef we wanted ter take the matter inter the courts, I ain't a doubt but we could send ye over the road fer this day's work."

Kanuck shot forward his beefy face aggressively. Such talk, coming from such a man, was ludicrous enough to cause a smile to flicker across Ted's face.

"Grin ef ye want ter," glowered Kanuck. "Mebby ye'll be grinnin' on t'other side o' yer mouth afore the jig is up."

"Do decent people, who are trying to make an honest living, make a practise of holding up mail-carriers?" inquired Ted.

That was a small-sized bomb, and caused Kanuck to jump forward in his chair and turn startled looks at others of the men. Kanuck's glances were returned with interest.

"There is no use of you trying to take a stand like that, Kanuck," said Ted. "You are one of the men that stopped the motor-car and lifted the mail-bag."

Ted was making a guess, when he said that; but it was a shrewd guess, for there were many things about Kanuck's appearance, and the tones of his voice, that suggested the spokesman of the trio of robbers.

"I reckon I'd hev ter be in two places at ther same time ef I was consarned in thet hold-up." Kanuck spoke deliberately, but his manner was that of a guilty man.

"Did Norris secure the letter he was expectin'?" Ted went on. "The one Don Pedro sent from Ash Fork?"

The men in the room were dumfounded. Ted took a great deal of comfort out of their consternation.

"Ye're talkin' a hull lot," said Kanuck sarcastically. "Whar did ye l'arn all this?"

"I happened to be the man that was driving the Red

Flier," returned Ted easily. "The mail-carrier remained in Phœnix and I stood the trick for him."

Kanuck jumped to his feet and strode angrily about the room.

"I remember ye, now," said he, halting in front of Ted and glaring at him. "Thar's a few little things about ye thet reminds me o' the feller in thet motor-car——"

"Then you were there, after all?" queried Ted blandly.

Realizing that he had let the cat out of the bag, Kanuck swore roundly and went back to his chair.

"I wonder if you found out," pursued Ted, "that the mail-sack you lifted was a dummy, put up for your especial benefit? If you went through my pockets, Kanuck, you must have found the letter written by this Don Pedro, telling Nick Norris to lay for the rough riders at Bridger's Gap. I intercepted that letter in Phœnix, and put another into that bogus bag telling Chislett that Norris was to lay for the rough riders at the Notch. You were there, all right, but the affair didn't terminate as you expected."

Kanuck jerked open a drawer in the table and pulled out some papers. Ted recognized the papers as belonging to himself. Kanuck pawed them over, came to the letter abstracted from the mails, and spelled his way through it.

"Blast ye!" he roared in a fury, his beady eyes fairly glittering with rage. "I'm hopin' in my soul the gal won't give in an' let Nick go! I want a chance at ye, Ted Strong—a chance ter even up fer what ye've done. Oh, ye're cunnin', all right—too cunnin' fer us fellers—but it ain't goin' ter help ye now."

"I'm not expecting I shall be able to help myself very much," Ted answered coolly. "There are others who will attend to that. This gang of yours, Kanuck, has committed its last lawless act. Nick Norris will suffer for what he has done; and if you, and the rest of these men, know when you are well off, you will release me at once. I am a deputy United States marshal, and if anything goes wrong with me the government will take a hand."

"Shut up!" snarled Kanuck, "er I'll gag ye!"

Nevertheless, Ted saw that he had given the men something to think about. The looks directed at him were not quite so savage and more apprehensive.

He did not dream that he could persuade this ruffianly crew to set him at liberty, so he was not disappointed when nothing of the kind happened. But, unwittingly, he was helping others to aid in his escape.

In the absence of Norris, Kanuck and Bill appeared to divide the authority between them. Ted recalled, at that time, what the sheriff had said, to the effect that, with the capture of Nick o' the Night, the Tonto Basin crowd would cease to exist as an organized gang.

The more he saw of Bill and Kanuck, and the men, the more Ted felt that the sheriff's statement was correct.

The afternoon was far spent when Ted had been brought to the gang's rendezvous. While he was talking with Kanuck a Mexican began preparations for supper. By the time the meal was ready another of the gang arrived.

This fellow, to Ted's intense surprise, was no less a person than Hank Chislett. How had the fellow managed to effect his escape from the rancher's potato cellar?

Chislett told his story, but not in Ted's hearing. The prisoner, therefore, was left to guess at the method Chislett had used in making his get-away.

He must have freed himself of his ropes in some manner, and left by way of the house while the rancher was absent.

Ted was allowed to sit upon the floor, with his back against the wall, and eat his own supper. The meal over with, the men drifted away, leaving only Bill, Kanuck, and the guard in the house. The guard, as it happened, was Chislett, who had relieved the man on duty when Ted recovered consciousness.

Bill and Kanuck talked in low voices, awaiting the return of the messenger who had been sent to the Big Pima Mine. It was nine o'clock, or later, before this man got back from his errand.

He reported that Stella was not at the mine, and that word had been received there that she had reached Phœnix in safety. Nick Norris, as near as the messenger could learn, had been locked in the Phœnix jail. The letter had been sent on to Phœnix by Gregg, the superintendent at the Big Pima.

From the conversation that took place between the messenger and Bill and Kanuck, Ted gathered that the messenger had found a go-between at the mine, and had got his news and delivered the letter to the super by proxy. That, in fact, had been the only safe way for the man to proceed.

A few minutes after the messenger had reported, he, and Bill, and Kanuck left the house.

Several hours passed, during which Ted slept with one eye open, carefully watching the guard, Chislett.

The only light in the room was furnished by a candle, stuck in the mouth of a bottle. As the night continued to advance, and the movements of men outside faded into silence, the movements of Chislett became queer, to say the least.

Ted was half asleep when the queer movements began, but they impressed him so vividly that he soon became wide-awake.

Chislett, softly rising from his chair, would listen intently at the open door; then he would step outside, and Ted could hear him moving slowly about, as though taking observations.

After that he would come into the house, with a disappointed air, and resume his seat.

Half a dozen times he repeated these maneuvers, at

intervals of half an hour, or such a matter. The last time he went out and came back he did not resume his seat, but passed quickly to the prisoner's side.

"It's all right," he whispered to Ted.

"What's all right?" Ted returned.

"Don't talk so loud," cautioned Chislett. "I'm goin' ter let ye loose—I been hired ter do it."

"Who hired you?"

"Two pards o' your'n—the fellers thet got away at the time yer horse was shot an' ye was taken in by Kanuck."

This unforeseen development almost took Ted's breath.

"I'm ter hev a couple o' hundred fer turnin' the trick," Chislett went on, "an' ye ain't ter do nothin' ter me on account o' what happened at the Big Pima last night. Yer pards promised, an' you got to afore I go any further."

"I'll promise," the young rough rider answered.

"Then thet settles it," said Chislett, pulling a file from his pocket. "I reckon it's goin' ter take some time ter git them irons off'n yer feet, kase I'll hev ter work keerful. But we'll make it, I hope; if we don't make it, it'll be all day with me."

Creeping softly to Ted's feet, Chislett began working with the file.

CHAPTER XII.

TED'S ESCAPE.

"The boss o' the gang's been run in," whispered Chislett, as he worked, "an' it's a cinch the boys can't hold tergether under Bill or Kanuck. They ain't neither of 'em got head enough ter run things. It took Nick fer thet job."

"My two pards pulled you out of the potato cellar and hired you to do this, did they?" asked Ted.

"Thet's what they done."

"They were taking big chances. I wouldn't have trusted you for a job of this kind."

"It was a case o' me er no one, see? But them pards o' your'n didn't know how big chances they was takin'. I agreed ter everythin', an' they give me twenty-five dollars in cash, with the understandin' that I'm ter have the rest when I deliver you inter their hands. When I took the twenty-five, an' said I'd try, I hadn't no intention o' carryin' out my part o' the contract. All I wanted was ter git clear.

"But when I got back hyer, an' began talkin' with some o' the men, I figgered that the gang couldn't last, now thet Nick's been run in, an' thought my best play was ter do as I agreed. 'Specially," he added, "seein' as how ye're a deperty marshal, an' thet, if anythin' happens ter you, the hull gang'll be held responsible. I done enough already, an' if I kin git out o' it by doin' a job like this, I reckon I better."

"I reckon you had," Ted answered dryly. "You're a murderous scoundrel, Chislett, and will sooner or later come to some bad end, but you've got sense enough to do the right thing now. How about getting away from the rendezvous when you've removed those irons?"

"Thar's a couple o' bronks, ready an' waitin'. They're handy by, in the greasewood."

For half an hour longer Chislett filed away in silence.

"Thar ye are," said he finally, twisting the ankle-irons off Ted's feet and carefully pushing the ball and chain to one side. "Nick interduced them things inter camp; whenever he got leery o' one o' the gang, he'd give him a spell with the ball an' chain till he promised ter be good. Thet was Nick's way. He was shore the best cap'n thet ever bossed a gang of fellers like us."

Ted arose and stretched his cramped limbs. Then he stepped to the table and took possession of as much of his personal property as he could find. He did not pause to see whether he had it all, or not, but jammed the plunder into his pocket and made for the door.

Chislett had already passed through. The young rough rider was about to follow when he heard a startled imprecation from the man who had been hired to befriend him.

"What in blazes aire ye doin' out hyer, Hank?" demanded the voice of Kanuck.

Chislett did not answer—there was no need of it. Kanuck turned toward the doorway, dimly lighted by the candle which had almost spluttered itself out. Catching sight of Ted, he gave a yell to arouse the camp and hurled himself at the escaping prisoner.

Ted met Kanuck's onslaught with a blow of the fist. The scoundrel reeled back, dazed by the blow, and Ted sprang past him into the outer darkness.

A tread of running feet was heard on all sides, accompanied by startled demands to know what had happened. Ted felt his arm grasped by Chislett.

"This way—quick!" muttered Chislett. "If we git clear, we'll have ter hustle."

Allowing himself to be guided by the hand clutching his sleeve, the King of the Wild West was conducted at a swift pace away from the stone house and to a patch of greasewood where Chislett had secured the horses.

As they mounted and bore away, the fall of their horses' hoofs drew the attention of the bewildered rascals they were leaving behind. Kanuck and Bill could be heard cursing and ordering the men to their horses.

"Let 'em come," said Chislett grimly. "They'll never ketch us at night, an' in a country I know as well as I do this."

Ted, of course, knew nothing about where they were. He had been carried over the road while unconscious from the shock of his fall, and had not been able to make any observations.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Not a great ways from Tonto Basin," replied Chislett, as they rode. "Thet old stone house is one of the gang's hang-outs; not the reg'lar stampin'-ground, but a sort o' makeshift they use whenever they find it convenient. I reckon ye got me ter thank, Ted Strong, fer pullin' ye out of a tight corner."

"What were Kanuck and Bill intending to do?"

"Sponge ye off'n the slate. Thar's an old shaft near thet stone house, an' if the sher'f had refused ter let Nick Norris go—which he would, o' course—ye'd hev been dropped inter the shaft and starved ter death."

"The bloodthirsty wretches!"

"They're thet, an' more. If ye hadn't fooled Nick when ye was drivin' thet motor-car, it's a cinch thet you an' yer pards would all hev cashed in at the Notch."

"I had some plans of my own to carry out at the Notch," replied Ted. "Why did Nick Norris hire you to get Stella Fosdick away from the Big Pima Mine?"

"It wasn't in the bargain thet I was ter tell ye anythin' erbout Nick, an' I ain't goin' ter. He's got enough ter shoulder without me pilin' up anythin' more agin' him."

"In for a shilling, in for a pound, Chislett. Now that you have turned traitor to the gang, you might as well tell everything you know."

"I'm goin' ter do jest what I said I would, an' no more. Nick Norris has allers been a good friend o' mine, an' I been willin' ter foller wherever he'd lead. But now that he's on the retired list I ain't goin' ter take up with any bull-headed boss like Kanuck er Bill. Thar ain't no brainier feller in the territory than Nick Norris, an' now thet he's been pinched, the gang's all in."

Now and then, as they galloped along, they would listen for some indication of pursuit; but they heard nothing.

"We've shook 'em," chuckled Chislett. "I wonder what Kanuck an' Bill are thinkin' about now?"

A few minutes later, after the moon came up and brought out the surroundings with tolerable distinctness, Ted discovered that they were on the Black Cañon trail. They came to a slope, and began forcing their horses up toward the crest.

"Hyer's the place ye was bagged," said Chislett.

Presently they crossed the top of the "rise" and descended on the other side.

"That you, Chislett?" called a voice from the trail side.

"Sure," was the answer.

"Did you bring Ted Strong?"

"Come an' see fer yerselves."

Two horsemen rode out of the darkness and into the moonlight. One of them had his right hand in a sling.

"Hello, Kit!" said Ted.

"Hoop-a-la!" whooped the delighted voice of Bud Morgan, as he rode stirrup to stirrup with his leader and threw a pair of arms around him. "It's shore the old warrior himself, Kit. Chislett has made good, I reckon—although blamed ef I believed it possible."

"This seems too good to be true!" came from Kit, as he caught Ted's hand heartily. "How are you, pard?"

"For a chap with a broken head I think I'm doing fairly well. I think I'm to be congratulated for getting out of the scrape as well as I've done."

"Well, gents," spoke up Chislett, "I got bizness som'ers else, an' if ye'll hand over the rest o' the dinero I got comin', I won't intrude my presence on ye any further. I've delivered the goods an' it's up ter you ter do the same."

"Give him his rake-off, Kit," said Bud, "an' let the ornery critter slide. I'm liable ter do somethin' ter him if he stays around hyer long. I can't git over thinkin' o' what he jest missed doin' ter Stella."

"There you are," said Kit, handing Chislett some bank-notes. "Strike a match and count 'em, if you want to; but it's all there."

"I ain't takin' nobody's word fer nothin'," answered the wily rascal. Striking a match, he ran hurriedly over the bills. "All here," said he, tucking the money away in his pocket. "Thet's what I call good bizness."

"Don't let us detain ye any longer, Chislett," snapped Bud. "Ye've done yer work, an' the quicker we part comp'ny with ye the better I'll like it."

Chislett gave a cool, taunting laugh, whirled his bronco around, and started north.

"If ye want my definition of a cold-game gent," remarked Bud, "one o' these hyer quick-ter-pull hombres out fer anythin' from standin' up a stage ter snakin' a game o' faro—thar he goes!"

"That's right," said Kit, "but he helped us over a mighty bad place in the road."

"Which I never had no idee he'd do," admitted Bud. "Thet twenty-five ye give him at Billings' ranch, Kit, I thought ye might better wad up an' stick in the stove. It only goes ter prove thet we can't be so wise all the time as we are jest occasionally."

"It was Chislett or no one, Bud," returned Kit. "I played him, and he won out."

"What did them pesky roughs do ter you, Ted?" asked Bud, as the three of them started southward.

Ted informed his friends concerning what had happened to him while in the hands of the enemy.

"Thet outfit is shore a tough propersition," muttered Bud, when Ted was through. "An' jest think o' Stella buckin' ag'inst sech a combine. If the gal hadn't had more sand an' sagacity than common, she'd hev been at the end o' her rope a long while ago. No use talkin', I take off my head-gear ter Stella Fosdick!"

"You boys must have had a close call, after I went down," said Ted.

"Blame it all, pard," cried Bud, in a fit of contrition, "neither Kit ner me seen ye when ye tumbled. We was ahead o' ye, an' in the excitement we thought ye was behind us. Didn't surmise what had happened until it was too bloomin' late ter do anythin'."

"You don't think for a minute, do you, Ted," spoke up Kit earnestly, "that we'd have left you behind if we had known what had happened?"

"You couldn't have done anything," said Ted. "If you had turned back to help me, that Tonto Basin gang would have captured the three of us. In that event, you wouldn't have been able to go on to Billings' ranch and make a deal with Chislett."

"Thet sounds reasonable," said Bud, "but if a feller's a pard, an' not jest a hired man, he'll never abandon a friend in sech a fix as you was in. We couldn't 'a' done it if we'd knowed it, right er wrong."

"Just as soon as we found out you were not with us," went on Kit, "we started back—left our mounts among the rocks and reconnoitered. But it was too late. We saw your horse, stretched out as stiff as a door-nail, but the gang was gone, and so were you."

"Then," said Bud, "we went on to Billings' place, an' Kit let loose with thet idee o' hirin' Chislett ter rejoin the gang an' see what he could do about gittin' ye out o' their clutches. No use repeatin' what I said. I simply told Kit Chislett 'u'd lie by the watch, make his gitaway, an' then give us the laugh. But thar ain't no use harpin' on the thing. He found out Nick Norris had been run in an' that settled things in his tin-horn mind."

"He thought it better policy to prove treacherous to the gang than to us," added Kit.

"How's your hand, Kit?" asked Ted, suddenly remembering the wound the rough rider had received.

"No particular harm done," was the reply. "Billings dressed it and fixed up this sling for me. He insisted, and I couldn't very well refuse."

"Where are we goin'?" asked Bud. "I feel tired enough ter hit a bunk an' stay there fer a couple o' days."

"We might as well lay our course for the Big Pima," said Ted. "It's quite a ride, but there are more creature comforts to be had there than at any place this side."

"Big Pima it is," replied Bud. "I'm game fer there, er fer Phœnix, if ye say so."

"The Big Pima will about hit me," spoke up Kit, and they settled down to the ride.

CHAPTER XIII,

CONCLUSION.

It was three o'clock Friday morning when the three rough riders pushed their jaded horses into the camp at Big Pima Mine. The horses cared for, they repaired to the bunk-house and dropped into beds belonging to men on the night-shift.

When the night-shift men came in, after breakfast, Ted, Bud, and Kit were not disturbed. The men whose bunks they had, sought other places.

Word was carried to Gregg that the rough riders had turned up. The super was overjoyed to learn that Ted was among them.

It will be remembered that Bill's note, offering to exchange Ted Strong for Nick o' the Night, had been placed in the super's hands, and he had been greatly exercised over its contents.

Word had been received at the mine that an expedition was forming in Phœnix with the object of penetrating the Tonto Basin country, rescuing Ted, and bringing his captors to justice. Gregg sent a man to town to inform the sheriff that there was no need of an expedition, for the King of the Wild West had regained his freedom and was then at the mine.

"Let the lads sleep," said Gregg. "They have worked hard and accomplished wonderful results, so I guess they are entitled to all the rest they want."

The dinner-gong at the chuck-shanty, vigorously pounded by the Chinese cook, was the alarm that brought the rough riders up in their cots.

"Breakfast!" exclaimed Bud. "Jumpin' sand-hills! It don't seem as though I had more'n laid down."

"Breakfast?" echoed one of the night-shift men, who was pulling on his boots. "You're shy a few chips, neighbor. That's the dinner-gong."

"Dinner?" repeated Kit blankly. "Great Scott! If it hadn't been for that Chink cook, we'd have slept the clock around."

"Anyways," said Bud, "I feel better. And hungry! My, my! I wisht I had words ter tell ye how hungry I am."

Ted's injured head was very much improved—so much so that he was able to remove the bandage. There was a lump, which interfered some with the proper placing of his hat, but otherwise the hurt caused him no inconvenience. A dash of cold water at the trough by the bunk-house was the last thing necessary to put him in fine fettle.

As he, and Bud, and Kit walked toward the bunk-house, they encountered a short, stubby individual with a red face, fore-and-aft cap, and a crop of overlong carroty hair.

"Fritz!" cried Ted. "How are you, my boy?"

"Bedder as I vas since dot macheen oof mine come pack," replied the German. "I haf him py der corral alretty. Stella delifered him py me in Phœnix last nighdt. Aber I make vone trip on horsepack yestertay und I dought id vould preak me in, doo, yes. How you vas yourseluf, Misder Shtrong?"

"I feel a heap better as I was," laughed Ted. "Boys," he added to Bud and Kit, "this is Fritz Webber, who works for Uncle Sam between here and Phœnix."

"Ye made a good understudy, Ted," remarked Bud, sizing Fritz up. "The Red Flier wasn't hurt none, was it, Fritz?"

"Dere vas doo oof ter dires b'usted yet," replied Fritz, "bud he iss all righdt odder vays."

"I'll pay you for the tires, Fritz," said Ted.

"No, you von't. Dey vas alretty paid for."

"Who did that?"

"Dot gal, Stella."

"Pard Stella is plenty prompt with her pocketbook," observed Bud, "but thet's her way. It's a fine thing she's got ther dinero ter spend."

"I dink, Misder Shtrong," went on Fritz "dot you safed me some drouples on der roadt. Oof I had been in der oddermopeel ven der roppery took blace, I should haf fainted fits righdt avay. Yah, you safed me dot. I owe you someding, don'd id?"

"Not a penny, Fritz."

"Vell, anyvay, I peen glad to see you alife. Ve ged vort in Phœnix dot you vas captured py der pandits. Ven Stella hear dot, she iss like a crazy vomans. She run aroundt, und she helps der cheriff ged mens for a possey-come-und-ged-us, und say dot she rescue Ted Shtrong oder she lose her own life. Yah, dot's vat she say. Und der cheriff he haf all vat he can do sooding her, und making her quiet, yes. But Stella, she von't haf it dot vay. She vill go oudt afder Ted Shtrong, py chincher! Und you bed you she vould haf gone oof ve hadn't receifed vort dat you had rescued yourseluf. Eferyding is all righdt now, hey?"

"Everything is O. K. now, Fritz. Nick Norris is in jail, isn't he?"

"Sure. Und ven he leafs der chail he vill be hanged so high as I can't tell. Subbose ve go und ged some tinner?"

Fritz always managed to take his dinner at the mine.

"Hello, there, Ted Strong!" called the super, rushing up to the boys as they went past his office. "I'm tickled to death to see you all back again. Go on to the chuck-shanty, but after you get through drop in for a minute—I want to see you."

"We'll do it, Mr. Gregg," called Ted.

Accordingly, after they had finished with their meal, the boys repaired to the office for a few words with the super.

"I merely want to congratulate you," said Gregg. "You've done something in two days that the sheriff of the county hasn't been able to do in two years. The governor ought to send you a vote of thanks."

"If we have done Stella a service," replied Ted, "that is reward enough."

"Cut out a notch o' the same kind fer me," expanded Bud. "We come ter Arizony ter help Stella, an' if we ain't quittin' loser on ther deal I'm satisfied."

"I wish you'd tell me more about the theft of the motor-car, and about how you rescued Stella," said Gregg. "Some points in that affair are a mystery to me."

Ted explained, assisted occasionally by Bud. If it were possible, the super's admiration for the rough riders was even greater than it had been.

"You boys are cracker-jacks, every last one of you!" he declared warmly. "I like to meet men who do things, and certainly you rough riders are in that class. If you stay very long in Phœnix, I want you to come out here and spend a week with me."

"We can't make any promises, Mr. Gregg," Ted replied. "There's a ranch up at Moon Valley, South Dakota, that calls for all my leisure time. We'll be hiking for there as soon as we get away from Phœnix."

"I've let out the secret about that mail-sack," went on the super, "and the boys got that delayed mail this morning."

"No hard feelings, was there?"

"Not at all."

"By the way, how long did Hank Chislett work for you?"

"Two weeks. We found he was stealing amalgam from the mill, but as we caught him before he disposed of it, we fired the rascal and let it go at that. But he's a bad egg."

"Shore he is, super. If he comes crow-hopping on this reservation, jest kick him off. Ye'll be glad ye did."

This from Bud. It was hardly a necessary suggestion, but it helped to ease Bud's feelings.

"You can bet he'll not hang around here long," said Gregg, "if he has the nerve to come back."

When the rough riders were ready for town, the super went to the corral with them while they saddled up. The mill whistle was blowing, and the camp was alive with men hurrying to the mill, the shaft-house, and the cyanide works. At sight of the gallant Ted Strong and his brave comrades, mounted and on the point of starting for town, miners and mill-men stopped in their scramble to get back to work, bunched together, and gave three lusty cheers for the King of the Wild West.

Ted waved his hat, and he, and Bud, and Kit joined in the yell. Then they struck spurs to their horses and went careering out of camp.

"That Gregg is shore the right stuff!" asserted Bud. "When he puts his mitt in yours, he does it hearty, an' not like he was handin' ye a fistful o' cold fish. I wisht he'd stray up ter Moon Valley—we'd recippercate his hospertality, wouldn't we?"

"We sure would!" declared Kit.

"He'll never get that far away from the Big Pima," returned Ted. "But he's a good fellow, all right."

They rode into Phœnix about the middle of the afternoon, proceeding directly to the corral where Ted had secured mounts for Ben and Kit, two days before. The boys had had bad luck with the hired horses.

Kit's, it will be recalled, had gone lame and been left with Billings. The rancher had sent the horse in by a Mexican wood-hauler. The animal was still lame, but slowly recovering.

Ben's bronco, which Ted had preempted during the trouble with the Tonto Basin crowd, had been lost, riding-gear and all. In lieu of this animal, Ted was returning a mount which Chislett had "borrowed" for him from the gang.

The horse was fully as good as the one that had been lost, for Chislett, in making his arrangements to help Ted out of the camp, had been careful to select the best broncos he could get hold of. As for the riding equipment, taken with the horse, that was fully as good as the gear that had been lost.

Nevertheless, Ted had imagined that he would have some difficulty in arriving at a settlement with the corral-keeper. But in this he was happily disappointed.

"It's all right, my lads," said the proprietor of the corral; "I'd have wiped out the score if you hadn't returned me a horse or a saddle. You've done great things in the hills and the whole town is proud of you."

"I'm beginnin' ter feel as though I was some punkins," remarked Bud, sticking out his chest and trying to look haughty.

"Don't," laughed Ted. "If you get to sailing too high, Bud, I'll have to put the boys next to Don Pedro and Paquita."

Bud collapsed on the spot.

"Don't do thet, Ted," said he. "I'm tryin' ter fergit it."

The City Hall clock boomed out the hour of four as the rough riders stepped into the office of the Ford Hotel.

The first person they saw was Ben; and the next one was Sheriff McFarland.

"I've been expecting you," said Ben.

"And so have I," added the sheriff, gripping the boys' hands all around. "You've done the work, Ted Strong, and done it with a rush. But you didn't have everything your way, even at that."

"We had one backset," Ted answered. "It looked formidable, at first, but it petered out."

"Stella, Ben Tremont, and I were all ready to take the trail with a small army of men," continued the sheriff. "If we had ever struck Tonto Basin with our outfit, we could have combed the place for fair and cleaned out every lawbreaker in the diggings."

"My only chance for a little excitement," spoke up Ben, with mock dejection, "and you had to spoil it all, Ted, by refusing to let us rescue you. But come upstairs," he added. "There's some one there who has been asking about every fifteen minutes if you've got here yet."

"Stella!" exclaimed Bud. "She wasn't worried much about me, was she?"

"Not much," grinned Ben.

Bud looked disappointed. When they trooped upstairs to the parlor, Stella gave vent to a little cry of joy and rushed for the group.

"Now, then," said Stella, leading the way to chairs, "you've got to tell me all about it, every last thing. I don't want you to leave out a word."

"Great Scott!" cried Ted, "that's a pretty large order."

"Jest give her an outline, Ted," said Bud; "arter thet we'll take a walk an' I'll fill in the blanks."

"I want Ted to tell me," pouted the girl. "If you could know how worried I've been, you'd begin right off."

"I would rather hear how you got along with Nick Norris," returned Ted. "I'll bet that's a heap more interesting than what happened to the rear guard."

"Nothing happened to Ben and me," said Stella. "You kept Norris' men back and we had a quiet trip all the way into town."

"Stella took care of the car," interjected Ben, "and I took care of Nick Norris. The car gave her about as much trouble as Norris gave me, which was none at all. We went over the line for a record, though," and Ben's eyes brightened as he thought of the trip.

Ted, Bud, and Kit then did their best to put Stella, Ben, and the sheriff in the possession of the facts concerning their work.

McFarland was warm in his praise.

"Stella Fosdick's peril," said he, "thanks to the vigorous and telling work of the rough riders, is now a thing of the past. Norris stands in the shadow of the gallows—there's no sort of doubt about that. His capture, as I think I told you, Ted, will disrupt the gang, and there will be no more lawlessness in and around Tonto Basin.

"As was well understood, Stella was the only person who stood in Nick Norris' way and could fasten upon him a crime the responsibility for which he could neither shirk nor evade. With Nick o' the Night gone, one of the worst enemies of law and order—the worst because the most cunning and subtle—will have passed away.

"The rough riders have added to their laurels. In view of their past record, I do not see how I could say more."

* * * * * * *

Nick Norris, otherwise Nick o' the Night as he was called from the many night excursions which he had planned and carried through to lawless success, was duly brought up for trial.

Jim Blazer was a witness against him, but of minor importance. The principal witness, and the one whose testimony threatened his neck with a noose, was Stella Fosdick.

In graphic words the girl told of the attempted robbery on the Black Cañon road, when her brother was slain. She described the shooting, explained how the mask had been slipped from the robber's face, and dramatically identified the prisoner at the bar as the highwayman and the murderer.

On advice of counsel, Norris did not admit that he was Nick Norris. But this subterfuge availed him nothing. Jim Blazer identified him, as did others.

The case was tried in record time, and a verdict rendered—murder in the first degree. Accordingly, Norris was taken to Yuma and executed.

The Tonto Basin gang disbanded, some of the members fleeing to Mexico, and others to even more distant parts.

And to Ted and his rough riders was given the credit for a masterly piece of work.

Ted, Bud, Ben, and Kit did not long remain in Arizona.

They took leave of Stella, who promised to visit them at their home ranch, in South Dakota, as soon as she could close up some business matters, and fared northward in the direction of Moon Valley.

There was an hour's lay-over in Ash Fork, and Ted and Bud, merely to satisfy their curiosity, called at the place where Bud had heard a cry of distress and had stumbled into a trap.

The don and Paquita were not at home. Some Mexican servants declared that they had gone into Chihuahua for a protracted stay. Whether this was true, or not, the rough riders had no time to find out. But it was of little moment, anyway.

THE END.

In the next issue of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, No. 118, will appear a thrilling story, entitled "King of the Wild West's Duty; or, Stella Cast Away in the Wilderness."

ABOUT THE EARLY NUMBERS OF THE

TIP TOP WEEKLY

WE receive hundreds of letters every week from readers asking if we can supply the early numbers of Tip Top containing Frank's adventures. In every case we are obliged to reply that numbers 1 to 300 are entirely out of print. We would like to call the attention of our readers to the fact that the Frank Merriwell Stories now being published in book form in the Medal Library are inclusive of these early numbers. The first book to appear was No. 150 entitled "Frank Merriwell's Schooldays." We give herewith a complete list of all stories that have been published in book form up to the time of writing. We will be glad to send a fine colored catalogue of the Medal Library which is just filled with good things for boys, upon receipt of a one-cent stamp to cover postage.

MEDAL LIBRARY

No.
150—Frank Merriwell's Schooldays.
167—Frank Merriwell's Chums.
178—Frank Merriwell's Foes.
184—Frank Merriwell's Trip West.
189—Frank Merriwell Down South.
193—Frank Merriwell's Bravery.
197—Frank Merriwell's Hunting Tour.
201—Frank Merriwell in Europe.
205—Frank Merriwell at Yale.
209—Frank Merriwell's Sports Afield.
213—Frank Merriwell's Races.
217—Frank Merriwell's Bicycle Tour.
225—Frank Merriwell's Courage.
229—Frank Merriwell's Daring.
233—Frank Merriwell's Athletes.
237—Frank Merriwell's Skill.
240—Frank Merriwell's Champions.
244—Frank Merriwell's Return to Yale.
247—Frank Merriwell's Secret.
251—Frank Merriwell's Danger.
254—Frank Merriwell's Loyalty.
258—Frank Merriwell in Camp.
262—Frank Merriwell's Vacation.
267—Frank Merriwell's Cruise.

MEDAL LIBRARY

No.
271—Frank Merriwell's Chase.
276—Frank Merriwell in Maine.
280—Frank Merriwell's Struggle.
284—Frank Merriwell's First Job.
288—Frank Merriwell's Opportunity.
292—Frank Merriwell's Hard Luck.
296—Frank Merriwell's Protégé.
300—Frank Merriwell on the Road.
304—Frank Merriwell's Own Company.
308—Frank Merriwell's Fame.
312—Frank Merriwell's College Chums.
316—Frank Merriwell's Problem.
320—Frank Merriwell's Fortune.
324—Frank Merriwell's New Comedian.
328—Frank Merriwell's Prosperity.
332—Frank Merriwell's Stage Hit.
336—Frank Merriwell's Great Scheme.
340—Frank Merriwell in England.
344—Frank Merriwell on the Boulevards.
348—Frank Merriwell's Duel.
352—Frank Merriwell's Double Shot.
356—Frank Merriwell's Baseball Victories.
359—Frank Merriwell's Confidence.
362—Frank Merriwell's Auto.
365—Frank Merriwell's Fun.

The Price of the Merriwell Books is Ten Cents per Copy. At all Newsdealers

A CHAT WITH YOU.

EDITORIAL NOTE.—The deluge of letters of praise pouring into our editorial rooms has impelled us to open this department, where, from week to week, we may meet our multitude of enthusiastic young readers and answer various questions concerning sports afield. If you desire to know anything connected with outdoor life, hunting, fishing, fur-collecting, or cowboy life on the plains, ask freely, since on our staff we have editors who are thoroughly posted in all that pertains to healthy sport in the open. In many cases we may have to abbreviate letters; but it shall be our aim to print everything that we believe must prove of interest to the great body of readers. We shall also, when not requested otherwise, give the address as an evidence of good faith.

In looking over a copy of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY the other day, I read what some of your readers have to say about the habits of animals, and the strange things they sometimes do. I have noticed some peculiarities of wood-pigeons in the parks of my native London, and thought that it might interest some of your American readers to hear about them. These birds are generally very dignified in their demeanor. It is an interesting sight to see two of these pigeons sitting on a bough in rainy or windy weather, oblivious to everything around them but themselves. There a pair will sit talking to each other utterly regardless of the presence of human beings, or any other animal. After sitting solemnly on the limb for some time, they will both fly off together and hunt up some place where they can build a nest concealed from prying eyes. Of course, the birds are not intent on putting up their house immediately; they are simply "house-hunting," as it were. Later on they begin leisurely to build their future home. When the leaves begin to appear on the trees, the nest is in process of construction, and, by the time spring has clothed all the trees and shrubs with a dress of magnificent foliage, the birds are ready to begin "housekeeping." You find then that they have taken pains to conceal the nest as much as possible. Then, when everything is ready, the birds take turns sitting on the eggs to hatch them out. By the time you get this letter on the other side of the Atlantic, the wood-pigeons will have some of their young ones already hatched. I think that we English boys enjoy reading the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY as much as our American cousins.

London. WILLIAM HASBROOK.

Our young readers who like to read about things which happen far away will be interested in this letter, written thirty-five hundred miles over the sea.

I thought I would write you a few lines and let you know that I have been taking the *Tip Top* and ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY for nearly one year. I have written a few lines to let you know that I think the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is all right. I like Ted the best of all, because he has the best head. Then comes Bud, the old cow-puncher, the good and true friend of Ted; then comes Ben, the college sport, as Bud calls him, because he is always talking about the East. Then comes Kit, the old boy who has been always true and faithful to Ted. Carl, the Dutchman, is the funniest fellow there is, besides Obadiah Tubbs, the fat fellow of the *Tip Top* book, and I think that Frank Merriwell's "American School of Athletic Development" will be a success, for it will be a great thing to the weak and sickly boys of America.

I think Dick Merriwell, Frank's brother, is a good ball-player and a good pitcher, and Brad is a good man at the bat, from what I have been reading.

Old Joe Crowfoot, the old Indian, is a good and true friend of Frank and Dick.

But Captain Wiley is a friend of all good fellows, and is a funny fellow, and tells a lot of jokes about the sea and ocean.

206 River Street, Cadillac, Mich. GEORGE MARTELL.

This reader likes both the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY and *Tip Top*.

I am not a boy, but I think I can write and tell you what I think about the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY. My husband and I are both interested readers of the weekly, and we think it the best book we ever read. We think Ted Strong deserves the title King of the Wild West. Next to him we like Kit Summers the best. Tell Stella Fosdick I think her one of the most wonderful girls I ever heard of. I would give anything if I could ride a horse as good as she can. Stella's long shot was one of the best I ever heard of, and I would be delighted to make the acquaintance of such a remarkable girl. The rest of the rough riders are very good, too.

I will close with three cheers for the boys who stand for a square deal, and never start anything they can't finish.

819 South Seventh Street, Quincy, Ill. MRS. CARRIE HARTE.

We knew that you would like Ted and Stella. What a handsome couple they make, and they perform so many wonderful deeds with rope and pistol.

I have read a good many books along this line, but I think that the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is the best. PAUL WRIGHT.

Statesboro, Ga.

Take Ted as your model, and you will never regret it.

I have been reading the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY for some time now, and I think that it's all right. I can hardly wait for the next one to come at the end of the week to find out more about Ted Strong and his friends. FRED KINLEY.

Rush City, Mo.

Do not fail to get next week's issue. The story is exceptionally good.

I have read several copies of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY. I think it contains the best stories of Western adventures that ever were written. WORTH ALEXANDER.

R. F. D. No. 1, Barney, Ia.

We are glad that you are satisfied with the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY.

I have been reading your books for some time, and find them all O. K. I have read them from first to last.

123 Estoria Street, Atlanta, Ga. C. W. MITCHELL.

"O. K." is the verdict of all who have ever read a copy of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY.

I have read a great deal about Ted Strong and his partners in the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, and am convinced that they are all right.

Ted Strong deserves a good hearty three cheers.

FRANK JOS. ZELTMANN.

405 Nineteenth Street, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Another satisfied reader.

I have been reading the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY for over a year, and others, too, but I think your weekly is the best of them all. JOSEPH C. WORTMAN.

St. Mary's, Pa.

Having the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, you do not need any others.

The ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is the best book I have read, and I think it is the very thing for boys of my age to read. I envy Ted Strong. I wish I was a rough rider myself.

4450 Cottage Grove Avenue, Chicago, Ill. COURTENAY LEWIS.

Why not join the band of rough riders?

In regard to the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, I have read them, every one, and think they are the best novels on the market.

Cambridge Springs, Pa. ARCHIE CASSELMAN.

What you say is echoed through the land wherever there is a ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY reader, and they are found everywhere.

I live in the country, but am always anxious to go to Frederick, so that I can get the last numbers of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY.

Ted Strong, Bud Morgan, and Ben Tremont are real bricks. I always wondered why the desperadoes called them boys, and yet they always were beaten in an encounter. I have wished to see their pictures.

I think they are the best stories ever written. I am afraid I have already written too much, so I will close.

Frederick City, Md. ERNEST HAIFLEIGH.

The young rough riders, though boys, have the hearts of men. Being perfectly fearless, they can always conquer their enemies.

I have been taking the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY for quite awhile, and I think that it is one of the best five-cent novels published. I should think that Ted Strong would have a sweet time out there with the rest of the boys. CHARLES GORHAM.
162 West Bow Street, Franklin Falls, N. H.

Ted Strong loves the plains, the pure air, the clear sky, the excitement of the round-up, and the freedom of the great West.

I think the stories that you publish about the young rough riders are the best stories about Western adventure I ever read. Every week I get one of the weeklies. ROY WYCKE.
261 Orange Street, Macon, Ga.

Then you like the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY?

I thought I would tell you my opinion about the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY. I read it every week, and think it is the best weekly I ever read. I cannot give it too much praise. FRED DREW.
Creston, Ia.

If you read the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY every week, you must like it.

I have been reading ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY since it started. I enjoy the stories very much, and will continue to read them.
Broken Bow, Neb. WARREN PENN.

The stories appeal to you because they contain only good, healthy tales of adventure. Ted always brings the villains to justice, and sees that the weak and poor are not ground down by the heel of the arrogant and vicious.

I have read your ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, and I think it is fine, because it gives vivid accounts of adventure. I have read all of the numbers except three or four. Almost every boy in this town has read some of the books. HARRY GORDON.
Box 575, Hillsboro, N. D.

This letter comes from the State in which Ted's Moon Valley Ranch is situated.

I have read a good many books, and I liked every one. I think Ted Strong is a brave fellow. He is kind and good, and has done a great many good things. When he makes up his mind he is going to do things, he does them, and doesn't let them go. I would like to see him once. The King of the Wild West has done some wonderful things. PAUL BURKE.
Grand Rapids, Wis.

Ted Strong has done many wonderful things.

I have been reading the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY for a year, and think it is the best book printed.
Ted Strong is all right, and so is Bud and the rest of the rough riders.
Ted has good luck with everything.
Tell Ted and the rest that I will write to them to-morrow.
Give Ted and the rest my best wishes. DAVE HELTON.
Pine Bluff, Ark.

Ted and Bud would be glad to hear from you.

I have been reading the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY for over a year, and I find it the finest story-book I ever read.
Springdale, Ark. WM. TODD.

What a treat to read the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY!

I am a reader of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, and can say that it is very fine reading. Every American boy ought to read it—it is very interesting. GEO. HARAHA.
Lancaster, Wis.

Nearly every American boy does read the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY.

I thought I would write you a few lines to let you know what I think about Ted Strong, King of the Wild West. I read the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY every week, and I think it is the best weekly published. I have been reading it now for over a year. I have read others, but they are not as good as the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY.
Ted Strong is a real hero. and so are the rest of the boys. Well, I will close now. With kind regards to Ned Taylor and Street & Smith. WESLEY PAYNE.
Huntsville, Ontario, Canada.

A graceful letter telling us how the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY strikes a Canadian reader.

I think that the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY has the best stories published. HOSEA MCADOO.
Texarkana, Ark.

There are no better stories of Western life published anywhere.

I write you what I think of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY. I have been reading them nearly ever since they were published. I think they are the best stories relating to the West of the present time.
5 Union Street, Holyoke, Mass. JOHN FRODEMA.

You have enjoyed yourself many hours reading the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY during the last year.

As for the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, I think it is the best weekly I ever read. It is so interesting and fascinating. Of all the weeklies, I prefer the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY every time. Wishing you success. R. M. COLEMAN.
620 West Sixty-ninth Street, Chicago, Ill.

This means a great deal when he says that he prefers ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY to all other weeklies.

I have been reading the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, and think it is the best book published. It is full of adventures, and that is the kind I like. WM. SOREN WILLIS.
Sullivan, Ind.

There is always "something doing" in the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY. Consequently the interest of the reader never flags.

I have been reading the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY for the last four months, and find that they are the best Wild West stories published. I think that Ted is an ideal hero for these stories. I hope Ted will have good luck in all of his adventures.
Norman, Okla. JAMES DORLAND.

We have told Ted that you wish him good luck, and he says that he heartily thanks you.

I think the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is the best weekly of Western stories published. GUY STEVENS.
Norway, Me.

The ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is as popular in Maine as in the other States of the Union.

I read the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, and can say that they are the best novels I ever read, and I've read a good many of them.
Staunton Military Academy, Staunton, Va. H. EDELSTEIN.

Our young friend finds that the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is the best boys' weekly he has ever had the pleasure of reading.

I told my friends how I liked the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, and then they read them. They say they are the best books they ever read. It is the best weekly ever published. The more I read, the more I like them. W. H. BEATTIE.
Montreal, Canada.

Your friends were pleased when they had their attention directed to the best weekly published.

I will willingly give you a word of praise for your ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY. It is the cheapest and most interesting weekly ever published for boys. It contains the most thrilling and exciting stories of Western borders ever published.
Flemington, Pa. WM. J. SHEARER, JR.

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